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THE GULCH MINERS;

OR,

THE QUEEN C — HE SECRET VALLEY.

CHAPTER I.

A ROMANCE OF THE GOLD REGION.

BY W. J. HAMILTON,

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THE GULCH MINERS.

CHAPTER I.

GOLD AND DROSS.

THE "city" of Oreton is high up in the sierra region of California, in the midst of the quartz-mining district. It is a city only in name. A few straggling houses and stores, a quartz mill or two, and a tavern, constitute its all. These places are head-quarters for the miners, and are built up in a day. This thriving town stands where, two months since, the Diggers and Pintos had it all their own way. Now, it is an odd mixture of races, the Chinaman, the hardy Welsh and Cornishman, English, Dutch, French, Mexican, and last, though not least, the omnipresent Yankee.

The inhabitants of California at the time this story begins, were of two classes: the workers and the hopelessly idle. The latter are men who went out in '48, when a fortune could be picked up in any gulch or cañon in the country, and who are now too lazy to work for a commonplace five or ten dollars a day, and so spend their time about the saloons, "cussing and discussing," and having a "right peart time" generally. Many of these men are from Pike county, Missouri, as might be known from the dialect. The workers are men who have left hard work and worse pay in the States, and are willing to labor, and labor hard, for a comfortable support.

With this prelude, it will be easy to understand the group seated on the veranda of the "Orient Hall," at the noon-tide hour, smoking and talking. The Californian finds little delight in the ordinary conversation of mortals. He is all *miner*. He discourses learnedly of "feet," and "leads," "lodes," and "strikes." He knows precisely when the Great Buncombe mine "busted," and how much money he sank in the speculation. He is great authority in the matter of surface-mining, and knows all the signs of good ground

Out of the heterogeneous material of which the group was composed, three sat apart from the rest, two of whom evidently were composed of Yankee clay. One was sitting with his heels on the rail of the veranda, smoking a clay pipe. He was a young fellow, with a pleasant, dashing air, and a well-knit, sinewy frame, comprising just six feet of healthy bone and muscle, together with a limited quantity of flesh. His companions were: first, an awkward-looking specimen of the Maine species, quiet enough to the eye, though not exactly the sort of man to tackle in a fight—a loose-jointed, long-limbed fellow, six feet four in height, with mighty arms which he well knew how to use; and next, a Chinaman, that most unfortunate race, to whom, after all, we are forced to look with veneration, as full of ancient learning. People in the States are apt to form a wrong opinion of these men. Though trampled on and abused by the whites, they are, for the most part, quiet and inoffensive to the last degree. Though generally of medium size, they are not so very small as the popular idea would make them. The Chinaman who sat on the veranda was fully six feet in height, with his hair braided in one tremendous tail, which reached nearly to his feet. The Chinaman shaves his head in front, and, like Samson, the vigor seems to go into the remaining locks of his hair, which grow to a great length. This fellow was in a sad plight. Both eyes were surrounded by a dusky ring, and there was blood upon his face.

"You sabbey (know) Haley, Jim," he said, addressing the young man, who had his feet on the rail. "Me sabbey him, too, *weally* (very) good. He too muchee no good. Him lickee me."

"I should think so," said the man called Jim, laughing. "How came he to do it?"

"Me tellee you. All good here. Me likee you too muchee. Me wash clothes for Haley good many time. Rub, rub, rub! Workee weally hard. Haley owe me two and a half. Me go in mill where he workee. Me say, 'How do, Haley, me t'inkee much 'bout you. S'pose you give me two and a half. You sabbey.' Haley say, 'No, Jan Ling, not give you one bittee.' He too muchee *no* good."

"What did you do, then?" said the other man, laughing.

"You ought to be able to thrash Haley. Why didn't you try?"

"I do try," said Jan, "try muchee. All two, t'ree time me try. I say, 'Haley, you sabbey me. You owe me two and a half. S'pose you payee me *now*, all ritee, muchee. S'pose you *no* payee me, me lickee you weally bad."

"Weally," is the Chinaman's dialect for *very* or real, and he uses it indiscriminately.

"What did he say, then?"

"He say, 'You *gittee*!' I say, 'No *shall* gittee. How can gittee, if no payee me?' Den he say, 'Me kickee you weally bad, if no go.' Den me fight. Me knockee Haley down flat. He too muchee no good. Me no 'fraid of Haley, s'pose him fightee fair. Him gittee up, takee me by *tail*. No more can fight, when him takee me by tail. Him blackee eye, him bloody nose."

"Sorry for you, Jan," said the long Yankee, "cut off the tail, and go at him again. How can any man fight with such a handle as that to his noddle? A *boy* could thrash you while you wear it."

"I heard about the fight," said James, "and every body says that Jim would have thrashed Haley if he had not got him by the cue. And talking of him, it is time the fellow had a lesson. You know that the General is just over from the States, and he was at table this morning with some of the gentleman who own mills on the sierras. Haley came in and sat down at their table, a private table, you know, with their own wine on it. I went to him and told him that it was a private table, but he would *not* mind me, I fancy that he does not look any too kindly at me. I shall be forced to fight him in less than a week."

"Then see that you lick him well," said the Maine man, whose name was Carden. "Nothing does a bully so much good as a real, old-fashioned drubbing. You are not used to fighting, Jim, so let me give you a bit of advice. Get the *first* lick in. It is half the battle if you can give your man a stunner before he knows what you are going to do. By the way, Jim, don't you think that this fellow has another reason for hating you?"

"I never thought of any."

"Have you not been running about the country with little Ida Hayes since you came here? You know you have. Well, before you came, *he* was her fellow. He is not bad looking, though he is a bit of a bully."

"I didn't think of that," said James, laughing. "May be you are right. Little Ida is the best rider and shot in this section, and let the best man win. But what did you come to me for, Jan?"

"Me sabbey you weally good. You good man. S'pose you lickee Haley muchee good. Me no *can* lickee him. *You* do it."

"In other words, you want me to thrash him for you, because you can not do it yourself? That's pretty cool, Jan."

"All good," said Jan Ling. "You do him, me give you five ounces, all yourself. Much money. Velly muchee money. Five ounces, s'pose you lickee Hall."

"That is even cooler than the first proposal," said James, aghast. "Do you suppose you can *hire* a Yankee to whip a man you don't like? If you was a white man, I'd thrash *you*. But you don't know any better. I can't do it for you, Jan. I don't like the fellow myself, but I can't punish him for you."

"If no likee *five* ounces, me give *six*," cried the Chinaman, pertinaciously clinging to the offer of money, the greatest inducement that could be held out to himself. "Haley come, he no good, he *too* much no good, he *catchee* me by tail and pound me too muchee."

"Shut up," said James. "I won't do it. Ask Tom Carden. He will do it for you."

"No I won't," said Carden. "Don't ask me. Here he comes now."

The person of whom they were speaking came toward them, walking close to the rail of the veranda. He was a stout built man, with a heavy mustache and a habitual expression of assurance on his face. Approaching the place where James sat, he told him to take down his feet.

"There is room enough to go behind me, if you want to go to the bar," said the young man.

He turned back and walked to the other end of the veranda. A general laugh followed, in token of pleasure at his

defeat. At the same time the General, who was still stopping at the house, came out and stood in the doorway, smiling at the discomforture of the bully, whose ungentlemanly conduct of the morning they had determined not to notice.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded Haley, fiercely, looking at one of the men on the veranda, whom he had once shot at for presuming to contradict him.

"Why did you not make Jim take down his feet?" said the other. "You are quick enough to fight with a man half your weight, but you take mighty good care about *six footers*. *They might hit back.*"

"Do you think I am afraid of him?" growled the bully. "You shall see then."

With these words he walked back to the place where James still sat, with his feet upon the rail, and once more told him to take down his feet. Jim saw at once that it was the intention of Haley to force a quarrel on him, but he resolutely refused to move his feet. Haley grasped him by the legs and overthrew him, chair and all. Remembering his friend's quaint maxim, "to get the first lick," James grasped the back of the chair, on which he had been sitting, as if to assist him in rising, and swinging it over his head, brought it down with all his force on the head of his enemy, smashing the chair to atoms, and bringing the ruffian to the floor with a bloody crown. Following up this success, he grappled with him. In these rough and tumble fights, there is no thought but to punish the fallen foe. This James did to his own satisfaction and that of the lookers-on. There had been a general rush to part the two when the first blow was struck, every one thinking that James was no match for the other. But, the General, in his bluff way, called out to them to "let that boy alone. He would take care of the fellow." This prediction was fully verified, for in five minutes Haley rose, a thoroughly used-up man, and staggered into the bar-room.

No one had the least compassion for him, braggart and bully as he was, who needed the castigation he had received sorely. But, the joy of Jan Ling was beyond bounds. He leaped up and down on the veranda, expressing his satisfaction in broken English.

"No likee *money*. No takee *money*. All rightee. Haley

be lickee ; I keepee six ounces, *all* good ! Jim good man, he lickee Haley all for nothing. *Muchee* good !"

"I don't like to put in a guess," said Carden, "but you have made an enemy to-night who won't forget you, Jim."

"I am not afraid of him," replied the other, who had not got a scratch in the encounter. "I have tried him now, and I know I can master him at any time."

"But, you know that he is a handy man with a pistol or rifle, and you must be careful how you are caught out at night. It won't be safe."

"I'll take care," said the other. "If he has a pistol, so have I, and he knows that *I* can shoot, too."

Haley came out, when he had finished his ablutions, with a bloody track along his forehead where the chair had struck him, and edged slowly toward the place where his enemy was sitting. Startled by the expression of his face, James slipped his hand into his bosom and laid it on the hilt of his revolver, while Carden prepared to shoot if the bully drew a weapon on his friend. But he did not do it. Still regarding his conqueror with that intent look, he stopped about four feet away and said, calmly,

"You think you have done a good thing?"

James did not answer.

"I will make you sweat blood for this," the fellow went on. "Mind that!"

"No threatening," said Carden, "or *I* will take you in hand. You never took the trouble to rile me up, Arthur Haley. If you do you will have trouble, you bet ye."

"You all think to put upon me *now*," he said, grimly regarding the group. "*Very* good. Wait and see. May be you will not always have things your own way. I'd travel on foot from San Joaquin to Portland to be revenged on that young upstart, and I will be."

With these words he left the place, passing through the line of coaches which stood at the door, for it was the hour when all the mails started. There they were, heavy, lumbering six-horse abominations, inventions of the adversary for the sins of suffering flesh. The drivers greeted Haley with a hoarse chuckle of approbation as he passed. It was evident

to them that he was "on it," a phrase which time and use have rendered California's own. After dinner, James went to his mill, in which he was an engineer. A roving, careless sort of fellow, a hard worker, but not able to stay long in one place. A new mine would be incentive enough to throw up a good job, and to sink what little money he might have in the new enterprise. He had invested money in nearly every useless mine in the country, and was ready to do the same thing again when opportunity offered. As he went into the mill he met the superintendent, with a downcast face.

"I don't think we shall start the mill to-day," said he. "In fact, I don't think we shall run it any more this year. If you will come into the office, I will give you your pay. What will you do?"

"I'm glad it has happened, as far as I am concerned," said the young man. "My partner and I have been thinking of a prospecting tour, and now there is nothing to hinder our starting at once. It's a hard time when we can't make our wages on the sierras."

He went into the office and was paid off.

"I heard you had a fight with that fellow Haley," said the superintendent. "You must fight shy of him. He is a suspicious-looking customer, and would do you an injury if he could."

"I'll take care," replied James. "What does a little tussle like that signify? I had to whip him or he would have whipped me. I don't see that I had any choice but to put in my best."

Leaving the mill, he walked out toward a ranche which could be seen from the village. He did not go as far as the ranche, but stopped in the edge of the woods near it, and made a signal with a handkerchief. It was soon answered from the house, and a girl came out, swinging a hat in her hand, and walked past the woods, humming a gay tune. When the point of woods hid her from the ranche, she stopped and waited. Jim was not long in coming up.

"I saw the signal," said she. "Why did you call me?"

"Because I have something to tell you. The mill has stopped running."

"And must you go, James?" she said. "I hope not. Can't you find work here?"

"We might. But Tom and I have a fancy for prospecting after a mine. If we strike anything rich, Ida, I will prove to your mother that she is wrong in distrusting me, by marrying you, with or without her consent. You think enough of me for that, don't you, dear?"

"I can't say," she replied, with a provoking shrug of her pretty shoulders; "mother thinks you are not the right one; she says you are such a wandering, careless fellow that you would tire of our little place soon, and leave me; may be she is right."

"But I *must* go now, Ida. California is not the place for idle men. We think we shall make a good stake if we go up the sierras and Carden says that I am the luckiest fellow at surface-mining he ever saw in his life. Don't be hard on me, darling," he pleaded, as she turned her back on him, "or you will force me to verify your good mother's prophesy, and run away for good."

"I'm sure no one stops you," she said, with a pout of her pretty lips. "Why don't you *run*? Mother thinks I had better marry Haley; he thinks a great deal more of me than you do, I am sure."

"Haley is a—"

"What is he?"

"Never mind; he is not the sort of fellow for you. Do be reasonable, Ida; I know you like me, or you would not take all this trouble to elude your mother and come out to see me. I am going into the mountains. It is dangerous work; there are gulches so deep that the sun-rays never get to the bottom, and men have been known to fall into them before now. Well, if you send me away feeling that you don't care for me, and that you do love him, I don't care how soon I drop into a pit."

"I didn't say that I did not care for you a *little*," said Ida, relenting; "I only said that you did not care for *me*. I don't like to have you go away, that is all. You provoking fellow, why don't you get work in the village, where I can see you once in a while? James," she broke in suddenly, "don't you suppose I know all about what you did at noon? How

could you be so stupid as to fight that brute—I mean, to fight Haley?"

"I assure you I could not help it, Ida," said he. "He pushed me over, chair and all, and if you had been there, you would have said that there was nothing for me to do but fight. Who told you?"

"Jan Ling; he came up here, post haste, nearly crazy with delight. 'You sabbey Haley?' he said; 'he too much no good; he lickee me. You sabbey Jim? he *good* man; he *weally* good man; me likee him too much. He lickee Haley weally bad; you likee Haley, all right; *you* too muchee no good. You likee Jim, *velly* good; he lickee Haley.'"

"The scoundrel! Who told him to come here? The fellow knows that I come here a great deal, and he thought you would like to hear about it. But I have no time to stay. I have to buy traps for a three months' prospecting tour. You will hear from me yet as a rich man, Ida. Don't let your mother persuade you that I don't love you, for I do."

They parted, and he went back to the village, where he found Tom waiting for him impatiently, loud in his anger against all "gals, keeping a chap away from his work." They set out together and made their purchases. Two horses, a mule, loaded with provisions, a rifle and shotgun, and those dangerous little weapons, revolvers, in the breast-pockets of their blouses. Prospecting is by no means safe work and these men knew it well. Wishing a servant to do their work and to aid them in digging, they secured the services of Jan Ling, who was overjoyed to be so employed. Next morning they started for the sierras.

CHAPTER II.

UP THE SIERRAS.

THE season of all others in the year when California is most enticing, was that when the three men set out on their wild undertaking. Carden rode in front, with his rifle slung across the saddle-bow, ready for use. Next came Jan Ling leading the mule, while James brought up the rear. Two days passed, and found them still climbing the steep Sierras, now plunging into ravines, toiling onward toward their proposed prospecting ground. A little stream ran down the mountain-side, and passed through the midst of the mountain gully. The spot had the appearance of having been but little disturbed. Perhaps some careless miners had passed through, here and there turning up a stone or rolling over an old log, in search of hidden treasure. That was in the days when riches lay in every yard of earth in the sierras.

They there resolved to camp. Jan worked hard ; since the day when James beat Haley he had tried to show his good will in many ways. With their axes they at once set to work building a cabin, for they must have "head-quarters," without delay. It took a day to finish their camp, and then they took their spades and set to work. Mining is hard, monotonous labor at best. They made a "cradle," for there was too much of the universal Yankee in them to get along with the primitive pan used by the Chinese and Mexicans. They found the ground, though not surprisingly rich, capable of producing good pay, perhaps five ounces a day for the three, of the best quality of gold.

The wonderful tales of the riches of California soil to the contrary, this was a good yield ; so much so, they determined to go no farther, but to settle down for a quiet four months' work. One day, while delving in the surface soil along the bank of the creek, it occurred to James to try a pan of the sand on the bottom. Upon washing it out he found that he had four ounces in the pan, in little drop-like particles, of the

purest gold. Surprised and pleased, they at once set to work to turn the little stream, which was done by digging a trench parallel with the water-course, and a little deeper than its bed. When the water was let into this, after two days' digging, it left over fifty feet of the bed of the stream dry. Though no more of the earth taken up was quite as rich as that which James had tried, they easily succeeded in taking out twelve ounces daily. Overjoyed at their success, they worked steadily for nearly a month, taking care not to make any unnecessary noise, or to light fires unless forced to do so. They knew that the mountain was full of men who were out on prospecting tours, many of them as lawless as savages. But, their provisions running low, it was necessary that one of them should go out on a hunting expedition, and James was chosen, seeing that he was the best shot with a bird gun. He had brought his dog with him, a beautiful hound, a trained hunter, greatly attached to his master. It was about nine in the day when he set out and climbed to one of the table-lands which abounded in this region. The locality literally swarmed with small game.

The young man shot industriously for two hours, during which time he bagged as much as they could well take care of. As he was stringing his quail he heard footsteps, and springing up with his hand upon his gun, saw that two men of forbidding aspect were coming toward him.

"Friends, stranger," said one of them, quickly. "No shooting."

"What do you want here?" demanded James, with his hand upon the trigger of the gun.

"As to *that*, stranger," replied the man, dropping the butt of the heavy rifle he carried to the ground, "I reckon that's as good a question for me to ask as for you. What am I doing here? Are this *yer* ground, or are it free to any one that likes to come an' go? It's *free* ground."

"You bet ye," said his companion, with a sneering laugh.

"I don't mean to interfere with you," said James. "Neither can I be at all familiar with men I don't know. That is plain enough, of course."

"*That's* all right," said the other. "We don't ask no better. We'll go about our business, I s'pose, while you go about

yours. Nothing fairer than that, you bet. We are out on a prospecting tour. Come down from Nevada City on purpose. So are you, I s'pose?"

James said nothing, but looked at them keenly. They were armed with rifles, and the hilt of a bowie showed itself plainly in the breast-pocket of each. The spokesman was tall, with a powerful frame, and a face which had *villain* stamped upon it as if in letters of fire. A scar, evidently made by a knife, extended across his forehead and nose in a diagonal line, and cut into the cheek on the other side. The wound had been so deep that it seemed to draw his face to one side, and give him a more sinister look than ever. He was dressed in a sort of hunting-blouse of green cloth, from the pockets of which a pistol peeped out on either side. He wore a pair of tanned buck-skin leggings, and moccasins of moose-hide. His companion was much slighter, but had every appearance of being on a par with his friend in villainy. James noticed that the fore-finger of his right hand was gone entirely.

"Whar do ye locate, stranger?" asked the larger of the two, with a sly glance at his companion. James pointed down the mountain-side, in a manner which might have included a circle of ten miles. The questioner nodded, darkly, to indicate that he understood that the young man did not care to be particular in naming the precise locality.

"Perhaps you don't *admire* our style, stranger?" said the fellow. "Perhaps yer kin show us a better."

"I don't want to quarrel with you," replied James. "But you are miners, and know how hard it is to keep whole bones in the sierras."

"I *admire* that, stranger," answered the fellow. "That's the very reason you ought to be civil. You ought, really. But we won't stop you. Go on your way. I shouldn't be surprised if we met again sometime, my young rooster."

The two ill-favored men passed on, and James took up his burden, and hurried down toward the camp. Fearing that he might be watched, he took a circuit and entered at the lower end of the ravine. He did not like the encounter with these fellows on the mountains.

His companion was equally disturbed. He was an older

miner than James, and knew more of the perils of prospecting than he did.

"Your description of the two reminds me forcibly of the scoundrels who have so long infested the passes, and robbed and murdered so many. A miner who escaped from them told me how they looked, and one of them you have described. I think you have met Jake Dodd, the terror of the sierras."

James started. There was no man in this wild region better known and hated, in his time, than that man. A relentless and blood-thirsty scoundrel, he had no pity for the unfortunates who fell into his hands. "Dead men tell no tales," was his motto, and few ever escaped alive from him. He was the head of a gang as desperate as himself, who were scattered at various points of the sierras, in squads of from two to six, and levied black-mail upon all unfortunate men who came in their way. They never interfered with these men while at work in the mines. That would be killing the goose that laid the golden egg. But, when the miner had amassed enough, and started for the town, they pounced upon him, and relieved him of his hard-earned gold, and generally took his life.

"What makes you think I have met Jake Dodd?" said James.

"Because this fellow said he had just such a scar on his face, and spoke of the way it seemed to draw his face when he laughed. It must be the same man."

"If it is not, then his face is against him," said James, "for I should say that a greater scoundrel never went unhurt. At any rate, we must look out for him or he may make us trouble."

"Me sabbey him weally good," said Jan, who had been listening to the conversation. "He too muchee no good. Sometime Mellican man good, sometime he weally bad. He too muchee robbee *Ohinaman*. Velly poor Chinaman, not got muchee money, takee all away."

"When was that Jan?" demanded the long Yankee.

"Udder time. Good long days ago, up on mountains. Takee seven ounces from Jan Ling. No likee him."

"If this is Jake Dodd," said James, "you may make up your mind that he will not rest until he knows where we are

working, and if he finds out, both our money and lives are in danger."

"Don't let us borrow trouble," said the other. "It won't do any good. Keep up a good heart and work like a man."

"It will be like working with a sword hanging by a single hair overhead," said the young man, uneasily. "You know we used to read in school about the sword of Damocles. We shall now understand how Damocles must have felt. Confound it! It is making a fool and coward of me. I wish some one whom we could trust would happen along. I would willingly share our luck with him, for the aid of one more stout arm."

"One more would make no difference," said the other, shortly. "No use talking that way. How many quail have you brought in? Jan, take a half-dozen of these beauties and make us a pot-pie."

While the meal was cooking, the young men were working in the bed of the stream, throwing up the gravelly soil, in which a glittering particle showed itself here and there. While thus working, they were startled by the report of a gun on the other side of the ravine, followed immediately by the clash of knives. Both the young men grasped their weapons and ran in the direction of the sound. Turning a little point of woods, they came in sight of a strange group. Three men were fighting with knives, fighting desperately too, one man assaulted by two. As they came in sight, James saw that it was time to act, for while the single man was parrying a thrust from one, the other had raised his blade for a cool thrust at his side. The frontier training of the young men had taught them that no time was to be lost in such cases, so, as the villain drew back his arm a revolver cracked twice, and with a loud oath, the wounded man dropped his knife and clasped his right arm with his left hand. The ball had passed through it below the elbow, shattering the bone. The other scoundrel, hearing the shot, fell back suddenly, crying out to his companion to look out for himself, adding the California word "git!"

"Hold on!" cried James. "Move a step, and you are both dead men."

The scoundrels had turned to run, but prudently halted upon

hearing this summons, and James saw that the one he had shot was the smaller of the two they had met that day upon the hills. He still stood holding the wounded member with his left hand, gazing savagely at the young miner.

"Stand where you are!" said Tom Carden, in a voice which the fellows understood perfectly. "Jim, speak to the young man."

James turned to the assailed man and looked him over quickly. He bore the inspection calmly. A man of middle size, with a remarkably handsome face, a little of the Spanish cast, a clear olive complexion, and dark eyes, which seemed to have the power of looking *through* a person. His hair was black and curled slightly. The moment his immediate antagonist retired, he put the knife back in its sheath, and stood with folded arms regarding the group.

"What does this mean?" asked James, courteously addressing him. "Why were you attacked by these men?"

"I can not say why," replied he, with a light laugh. "I only know that, as I was coming down the ravine, I was fired at by one of these fellows, so close to me that the powder burned my coat. But, for all that, the bullet did not touch me, though it passed close enough to make it warm for me. Missing his aim, they tried knives, and I make no doubt they would have succeeded in their laudable intentions if you had not come. I thank you from my heart; and I shall try, if I ever have occasion, to repay your kindness."

"None of that," said Tom, bluntly. "We haven't done any thing. It's a poor show when honest miners won't stand by one another, against a set of sneaking horse-thieves like these. Give me your cross-belt, Jim; I want to tie this chap."

"What's that fur?" growled the fellow. "Can't a chap work out a private grudge ag'in another without bein' hitched up? Ye'd better let me alone; it'll pay ye better."

"Put out your hands," replied Tom. "Keep an eye on that wounded devil, sir. Don't let him git away. I want to see if honest men are to be put upon in this way by a set of infernal scoundrels. Put out your hands, I say! You know frontier law. Put them out."

The fellow obeyed, sullenly enough, and Tom drew the

strap three times about his wrists, and then buckled it stoutly. This done, he drove the two before him to the cabin, which he was certain they could no longer conceal, both the ruffians protesting that they were not going to be kept prisoners against their will. To all these outcries the miner made no reply, but cut a lariat into pieces about four feet long, with which he replaced the strap on the largest of the two men, drawing his arms behind him, and fastening them at the elbow and wrist. Then he took him into a little partitioned recess at one end of the cabin, and forced him to lie down, when he tied his feet in the same manner, amid a shower of curses from the victim.

"Dry up," said Tom. "You ought to know that this of no use with *us*."

Leaving him prostrate on the floor and still cursing vigorously, Tom went back to the other man, and made him take off his coat, so that he could look at his arm. It was a bad wound. The ball had passed between the small bones of the forearm, smashing the smaller one and passing out on the other side. Up to this time, he had not spoken a word. He still remained silent while Tom satisfied himself that the ball had passed out, and dressed the wound as well as he was able. His sinister face seemed to darken more and more with each new twinge of pain, and he set his teeth hard together.

"Ah-h!" he hissed. "Why don't you twist it a little more, you rascal? I'll make you sweat for this."

"If you will take advice, my friend," said Tom, bending to tie the last thread in the bandage he had put upon the wounded arm, "you won't go on in that way. Bear in mind that *we* have the power, not *you*, and we intend to keep it."

"Your power will not last long," replied the villain, with a dark smile passing for a moment over his face. "Do with me as you choose. We shall see the end."

They put him into the recess with his companion after binding his arms firmly, and closed the door. This done, the three went out into the open air, to consult as to the best mode of getting rid of the scoundrels. By the miner's law, which in the wild regions of the west is held superior to any other law whatever, the two men had forfeited their lives. It was nec-

esary, in those almost savage days in the records of the gold regions, that there should be a check upon the impulse to rob and murder fomented by a desire for gold. Nothing but the most relentless justice could be of any avail. Capital punishment was the only punishment for murder, especially when there was an attempt to rob. Indeed, robbery would be regarded as the master crime of the two. If a miner shot down another, the near friends of the slain man might think it incumbent upon them to avenge his death, but their fury would be nothing to that aroused by robbery. Men often escaped who had killed a man for vengeance; but for robbery, his companions pursued him with a savage rancor hardly to be described. This will be understood when we reflect upon the position of the miner. Without some such safeguard, there would have been no security for him. And to keep down the lawless villians who swarm to every new country, they must realize that, for any offense which, by the criminal law of "the States," would consign them to a prison, the judgment of the miner is death!

But, as the rush of miners passed away, this law had been somewhat modified. Many of the miners could not conscientiously rob a man of life for a comparatively trivial crime. And though the law was still in force, in many cases the victim was allowed to escape. Our young miners were in a quandary. To turn the desperadoes loose, now that they were incensed against them, would be to put themselves in hourly peril. The menace of the wounded man implied slumbering vengeance, and he was the sort of man to carry a stone in his pocket seven years, turn it, carry it another seven years, and dash out his enemy's brains with it at last!

"I am sorry to have brought this trouble upon you," said the stranger. "Why did you not let the fellows finish their work? It would be small loss to the world; for there are few enough in it who care one straw how soon Herbert Brayton lies beneath the sod!"

"Don't speak in that way," said Tom, earnestly. "I *can't* stand *that*, you know. A handsome young fellow like *you* going on in that absurd way, as if you had nothing to live for! Why, man you talk wild. Look around you, and in the face of every thing you see say, if you can, that there is nothing

to live for. If a woman has jilted you, give thanks for it, as one of the undeserved blessings of your life."

"You are satirical," said he, laughing.

"Not at all. I like women well enough, but, bless you, they are only made to deceive us, nothing more nor less. There is my friend Jim, as good a lad as ever stepped, and yet he is as fairly trapped by a pretty girl, in Oreton, as you ever saw. He's nobody at all in her hands, the sly little imp."

"Now, Tom—" began James.

"You shut up," cried Tom. "I am out of patience with you. Ask Jan Ling what *he* thinks of women, and his verdict will be, 'too muchee no good' always. But, Mr. —, I did not get your name, sir."

"Herbert Brayton."

"Mine is Tom Carden; my friend's, James Davis. You may trust us, sir; and don't let us hear you say that no one cares whether you live or die. As for dying, you won't do that. I've talked just such stuff myself, before now. If you want money, look ~~here~~—we have struck something rich, and we want to share it. As for Jim, there, if he did not say, five minutes before we ~~heard~~ that shot at you, that he wanted one more stout arm. As we say is, will you join us?"

"You overpower me," said the young man, putting out his hand quickly. "This confidence in a stranger is surprising as it is pleasant. I thank you beyond measure for your kind offer, but I have no right to rob you."

"Bah! we want you since this bout with the rascals in the house more than ever. We are not strong enough here. Jan Ling don't count for much in a fight, unless he is cornered, and then he is the most plucky Chinaman I ever saw. Say that you will join us."

"What does Mr. Davis say?"

"Just what I said before. We want you here, and shall take it as a *favor* to us if you will join us now."

"I accept your kindness, then, and shall no more complain of my ill fortune while I live. I may as well tell you who I am. I was born in New York and have been a waif all my life; a restless mortal, careless of my money, careless of myself. A sailor in the last few years of my life, I have always run away from my fortune when it was ready to drop into my

mouth. I went out for a cruise in a whaler, and left her at the Sandwich Islands. I should have staid with her; she has filled up twice since I left her, two years ago, and as I had a twentieth lay, I should have made a raise of ten thousand. But, the old man quarreled with me, and I went ashore. I have been in South America, and fought in the army of the Dictator of Paraguay. I held a captaincy and was doing well when I lost favor with Lopez, and he ordered me to leave. I did not like to be *obstinate* with the old fellow, so I humored him. Bless you, there has hardly been any South American war in which I have not had a finger. Then I commanded a miserable little sloop of war, in the service of Peru, and kept with her until an unlucky greaser blew her up by accident, while I was ashore. It wasn't *his* fault that he didn't blow her up at sea! He was careless enough to do it. Of course it was laid to *me*, so I had some loud words with the President, and left him. Here I am now, trespassing on the good nature of two young men who have nothing to show why they should befriend me except the common tie of Yankeehood."

"And is'nt that tie enough?" cried Tom. "A Yankee, and not stand by another Yankee! Perish the ignoble thought! But, now to business. We have a stern duty to do. These villians must be punished. I, for one, see nothing for them but the cord and tree. They have incurred the penalty of the miner's law, and it should be meted out to them."

"No doubt they deserve any fate we could give them, but I am such a chicken-hearted fellow, that I can't bear to think of hanging them," said James. "Can't we get rid of them somehow?"

"They no doubt belong to that gang of robbers who infest the foot-hills, and if they are allowed to escape, we shall have no rest. The knowledge of this place will remain with us when they are gone."

"Could we not keep them prisoners?"

"That might be done, though it would be a great trouble. If we could only get them to a township, we could let the law deal with them. Let us try them by miner law, and give them their deserts."

"You are harsh," said James.

"I have been longer in the mines," replied the other. "You

ought to know what villains these men are. They have no pity. They should receive none. This man who is wounded answers to the description of the friend and lieutenant of Jake Dodd, the robber of the foot-hills. His name is Sam Bagot, known in this region as Slippery Sam, from a habit he has of getting out of a difficulty. Suppose I am right in my conjecture, and it is more than probable that I am, and we set him at liberty, you can imagine what the result will be. We shall not only lose our money, but our lives. *They* will not be squeamish, if we are."

"You are right," said Herbert Brayton. "Shall we give them a trial, in true frontier fashion, and string them up? I have no particular love for the fellows, for my part. If you had not come up, I should have been killed. I wonder at them, too, thinking of getting any *money* out of *me*, and they could have had no other grudge against me, for, to my knowledge, I never saw either of the fellows before."

"Yet one of them spoke of settling a private grudge, you remember."

"If that is so, perhaps you were mistaken for some other person, or else the scoundrel lied, as is extremely probable."

"I have a thought," said James eagerly. "I can't bring myself to think of hanging these men, villains though they are. Don't you remember the hole in the hillside which I noticed yesterday? It would make a capital prison, and we could carry them something to eat when we chose, and not be bothered with them in the house."

"There is something in that, Jim. At any rate, since you feel as you do about putting an end to the fellows, we will take them there at once. Somebody might happen along, and I do not care to have them seen in the cabin."

They led the prisoners across the open ground in front of the cabin, after blindfolding them carefully, over the dry bed of the stream, and paused at an opening in the rough hillside, large enough easily to admit the passage of a man's body. It was merely one of those large "pockets," so common in the quartz system, which had been hollowed out by some natural cause, so as to make a cavity perhaps ten feet in every direction. The floor was made smooth, and covered

with leaves, which Jan Ling, who had slept in the place before the cabin was built, had placed there.

"A nice room," said Herbert. "Better than the scoundrels deserve."

"You think so," said the smaller of the two men, with the old sinister smile crossing his face. "And you call us *scoundrels*, do you, Mr. Davis?"

"My name is not *Davis*," said Herbert. "You have made a mistake here. My young friend here is called Davis."

"I can't see for the bandage," said the other. "Which is it?—the fellow we tackled this morning?"

"Yes," said Herbert. "But my name is not Davis at all."

"Then," hissed the other, "we have missed our game, after all, and got ourselves into a devil of a scrape for it. There is a mistake here, gentlemen. I hope you'll excuse us. We took you for the man we wanted."

"Never mind," said Tom. "It's all right. We mean to leave you in this place, and shall bring you food when you need it. For your own good, I advise you to keep as quiet as you can. Otherwise you'll have short shrift. I tell you we are in no mood to be trifled with."

The only answer to this was a muttered curse, and the two men were led into the hole, where their feet were again bound more securely. This done, the young man went back to the cabin, where Jan Ling shortly after set before them a savory repast, cooked as only a Chinaman knows how to cook. Herbert, who had seen little of these strange people, praised his culinary powers highly, and won the approbation of Jan Ling, condensed into the verdict, "He weally good man!"

CHAPTER III.

WHO WAS SHE?

FOR a week the mining went on as usual. There were no more intruders upon the stamping-ground they had found. They worked hard, and found the soil very productive. A season in such soil would set them up, would enable them to

leave the country, if they desired to do so. As fast as the dust was taken out, it was placed in a large tin can, which had been brought up from the village by Tom, having a cover which could be screwed down tightly. This was sunk into the earth floor in one corner of the cabin near the place where Tom always spread his blanket.

None of the miners liked the unnatural quiet about them. They were certain that more of Jake Dodd's band were in the hills, and it was not to be supposed that they should allow their comrades to be held as prisoners, if within their power to prevent. One day, while they were at work, they were surprised to see a boy coming toward them, from the direction of the point of woods before mentioned. A strange boy! In looking at him, precocious, self-possessed, it seemed doubtful whether he was not a *man*. In every thing except stature, he *was*. He was dressed in a hunting-shirt of green cloth, with a belt at his waist and moccasins on his feet. He carried over his shoulder, with a jaunty air, a fowling-piece nearly as long as himself, and he had a bowie in his belt, while an oblong protuberance in the breast-pocket of his hunting-shirt gave token of the presence of a pair of pistols.

"Satan himself!" cried Tom.

"I reckon yer wrong thar, stranger," said the strange youth, dropping the butt of the gun to the ground and leaning on the muzzle. "Only one of the old boy's *children*. A fav'rit child, too. What you done hyar? Struck suthin' rich, eh?"

"What do you want?"

"I reckon that's a stray question, jest now. I'm not in want of any thing, 'cept suthin' to eat. *I'm* prospecting, I am. Been up thar, north of Oreton, and bought some feet; but, dear me, 'taint no good—*wild-cat* stock! ain't wuth a cent! So I jest took up Betsy Jane, that's my gun, you know, and started out prospecting. That's why you see me here."

"Who are you?" demanded Tom.

"I'm Billy Forbes of Piketown. Don't know me, I reckon. That's *your* loss. I've been traveling round this yer kentry a long time, a heap of years, I guess. Yer see the old man and I lived up thar in the sierras, and he took a notion to

tackle a grizzly that was too many guns for him. Consekens, he got chewed up. Grizzly put after *me*, but I climbed a tree and got away from him. 'Twas winter and durned cold up in the tree. Prehaps you don't know what the foot-hills and sierras are in the winter weather. If that durned grizzly didn't sit thar four mortal hours I'm a sinner. And all I could do to keep warm was to climb up and down in the tree, from the top branch to the lowest, and then up to the top ag'in. Jist at dark, old grizzly got mad and left me. Since that time, boys, I've been trampin' through the kentry, tryin' to make a raise. I ain't done it *yit*. Durn my hide, what a thing it is to be left a orfling in youth."

"It don't seem to affect you much," said Jim, with a sharp look at the boy.

"Lord bless you man, what do you expect? I ain't a-going to blubber, am I? I never did do that, and I reckon I shan't begin at my time of life. Durn it, I've had hard times enough, and seen enough to make *any* one blnbbber, but it ain't made *me* do it, 'cause it ain't *in* me. Hide and buttons! You've struck it rich here, ain't you? Good gracious, what bully earth! Let a feller in, won't ye?"

"I'm afraid you can't work enough to pay your way. It needs a strong man to work at surface-mining."

"Teach your grandmother," was the rather irreverent reply. "Don't fret yourself on my account. I tell you what I'll do, stranger. You let me in for one day, and if I don't take out as much dust as the best man among yer, why, then, yer kin kick me out. That's fair, ain't it?"

"Go up to the cabin yonder, and tell the Chinaman that you want something to eat. While you are gone, we will talk about taking you in," said Tom.

The boy turned and walked back to the cabin, when he slapped Jan on the shoulder, as he was bending over the dinner kettle of soup.

"Hullo, *John*!" said the boy.

"John," be it known, is the universal name for a Chinaman the world over, and he answers to the name. As a general thing, John does not like the "Mellican man," and Jan Ling had been too much plagued by the boys at Oreton to like the appearance of Billy Forbes.

"Who are you?" demanded Jan. "What you lo here? You go 'way quick; you no go, by gar me burnee you. Got *chow-chow* here, *weally* hot. S'pose you no go, me burnee you velly bad. S'pose you go, all rightee."

"None of that, John," said the boy, lifting his gun, and cocking it with a sharp click. "You give me chow-chow to eat."

"Better takee good care," said Jan, in a threatening tone. "Me lickee plenty Mellican man 'fore now." Jan had a peculiar way of pronouncing plenty. It became, with his utterance, "pil-an-ty," and rolled out from under his tongue like a sweet morsel. "You sabbey me, good. Jan Ling my name be. *Many* time me lickee Mellican man."

"Why, yer old fool," cried Billy. "I'll shoot you if you say another word."

He raised the piece as he spoke. Jan put up his hands in great dismay.

"No shootee," he cried. "Wantee chow-chow? All rightee. Plenty chow-chow here. Me likee Mellican man too muchee. He *good* man. He *weally* good man. He muchee good to poor Chinaman."

"Then don't blow about *burning* me again, old Puck-a-Ding!" said the boy, as Jan approached him with a bowl o' soup. "That's right; I know yer kin cook. Set down and wait until I want some more."

For some moments no sound broke the silence but the rattle of Billy's busy spoon, as it passed from the bowl to the mouth. The bowl was three times filled and emptied, at the end of which time he straightened back, rubbed himself with his open palm, and looked benignantlly at Jan Ling.

"Likee him?" asked Jan.

"Bully!" was the compressed verdict of Billy Forbes. "Now I'll go out and look after my partners. Durn them, I hope they won't be hard on the weaker portion of the company. If they are it will be their ovr. loss, for Billy Forbes is seed, he is."

While he had been engaged upon the soup, the others had consulted and agreed to allow the boy to join them, basing his share of the profits upon the average amount of gold he was able to take out in a week. The boy accepted the offer

eagerly, and set to work at once. All that afternoon he kept them in a state of laughter by his peculiar sayings and doings. His native wit was as keen and rough as quartz. There was very little of the *boy* about him. Indeed, the rough and tumble life which he had followed had made a man of him early.

"Yer ain't safe here, though," he said. "Coming through the hills, I met some miners, and they told me that Jake Dodd was down here with his gang. You'll have to keep a sharp look-out for Jake Dodd, fur he's the devil's own, that he is. If *he* gets wind of this place, you are gone goslins, every one on ye."

The young men looked at each other in some dismay at this unexpected confirmation of their fears.

"How did these miners know that Jake is here?" asked James.

"'Cause he cleaned out two of them day before yesterday. Got a hundred ounces from them, too. That's pretty rough on them, poor critters, for they had been workin' all last season for it, and had just brought it down."

"The infernal thief! Now, don't you think you have been mistaken in being so merciful to the villains you have in the cave? I say, let us have them out and give them frontier law, the cord and the swinging-limb!" cried Tom, indignantly.

"No doubt you are right, old boy," said James; "but I am very much opposed to the death penalty in these cases. It seems too hard on the fellows, for the simple crime of robbery."

"You talk like a fool," cried Tom. "If we had *prisons* for the condemned rascals, or any civil law that could touch them, it would be a different thing. But how, in the name of safety, are we to punish them at all, if we don't hang them? We can't turn them loose, and it is a danger and trouble to keep them."

"Quit talking Dutch," said the boy. "Who have yer got that you want to hang, eh?"

Herbert explained.

"Oh, ho!" said Billy, wagging the wary old head perched upon the young shoulders. "*Jest* so. Then why don't you

shoot the rips? It is quicker than hanging, and a sure thing. They don't wait long to make an end of robbers and murderers where *I've* been. 'Sides, they've killed enough good, honest miners, in their time, to entitle them to a free pass out of the world, ten times over. And if I had *my* way, they wouldn't have long to live."

"The boy reasons like a man," said James. "Well, let it rest until to-morrow, and then put it to a vote. If you all say *hang* them, I shall say no more; but I can't bear to have a hand in it."

"And yet you are the man they wanted to kill," said Tom.

"I don't understand that at all. I never set eyes on the scoundrels in my life, and it is impossible that they should have any reason for wanting to get me out of the way. I have positively no enemy that I can think of."

"Haley!" said Tom.

"Yes, Haley, perhaps."

"You *know* he hates you."

"Granted. What of that? He is not within fifty miles of this place."

"I don't know how I came to think of him," said Tom. "His name seemed to come into my mouth so naturally when you said you had no enemy. Of course he can have nothing to do with it, but if he were here, I should know how to account for the attack. Would you like to see these fellows, Billy? If you will go to the cabin and get a basin of soup for them I will show them to you."

Billy ran away to the cabin, convinced Jan that his soup was not intended for private consumption, and came back, bringing it carefully in his hands. They crossed the dry bed of the torrent, and reached the prison of the two robbers. They were lying on the pine leaves, conversing in low, savage tones. Both started at the coming of the miner, and began to eat, when one hand was set free, glaring at Tom, standing near, with his hand upon the pistol butt, ready to fire if any attempt was made to escape, and at Billy, who stood regarding them with a quizzical expression of countenance.

"When are you going to let us out of this?" demanded the smaller of the two prisoners, who had all along acted as spokesman.

"I do not know that you will ever get out, except to *die*," replied Tom, quietly. "You know your offense; you know its penalty."

"You won't dare to kill us?"

"That depends upon the majority. There are four of us who have a vote in this matter, and if three of them vote *death*, you die to-morrow."

"But, think what you are talking about. There are those in the foot-hills to-day who will make mince-meat of you if you injure a hair of our heads. Have you ever heard of Slippery Sam? You have; I see it in your face. I am Slippery Sam."

"I knew it," was the answer. "Or, at least, I have suspected it all along. And who is Slippery Sam? What right has he to expect any thing but death at the hands of an honest miner? What right has he to live at all? There are many bones whitening in the sun of the sierras to-day which would not be there but for *you*. Fiend! did you think *your* name would protect you? It ought to be your death warrant."

"Don't go off the handle in that way," said the villain, in a surly tone. "*That* won't do any good, as I see. I ain't one of the kind to be scared with words. You know I have friends; they know where I went, and if I don't go back to them soon, they will *look* for me. And when they find me," he cried, shaking the hand which was untied on high, "woe to those who have dared to insult me by cords!"

"We will not trouble your *friends*," said Tom, angrily. "You shall join them. We will send you to your master."

"I have none."

"You have. He is not often mentioned in polite society. Those who know him best call him the *devil*, and he lives in a place where brimstone and kindling wood are never wanting to make a hot fire."

"You make jokes, do you, young man? Oh, but the time will come when you shall regret all this. Why don't you finish us now? It would be better. Peg away; and afterward remember that you have killed the friend of Jake Dodd."

"I hope to have that one thing to put down among my good deeds," replied Tom. "You most infernal scoundrel, you

have not long to live. We vote on your death to-morrow. Think how good your chances are when you know that your life depends upon the vote of the young man you tried to murder, the other day. There are two of us here, and we both say 'death!' "

"Have it your own way," said the desperado, with a gloomy look. "A man has only once to die, and I hope I can meet my fate without flinching. What is *that* imp grinning at?" alluding to the boy. "Send him out."

"You don't need to get off your horse on *my* account," said Billy, with great composure. "I ain't to be scared with *looks*, either. Don't direct any of your affectionate glances at me, either, for I can't bear it. I'm *young*, you know, and do things sometimes without license—such as shootin' skunks, for instance!"

"Be quiet, Billy," commanded Tom.

"I'm dumb," said the boy. "But what does he look at me for, then? I ain't going to stand it. My advice is, to take him at his word and shoot him off hand. It will save a heap of trouble."

"It would take very little provocation for me to do it," said Tom, "when I reflect that all our lives are in danger if he escapes. Hold out your hands, if you have finished your meal."

The prisoners were bound, and the two left the little cave. That night it became the turn of Herbert to stand guard, for, since their encounter with the prisoners, one of them kept watch half the night, and then changed. Herbert took a seat upon a small boulder outside the door and looked out toward the entrance to the ravine, and the point of woods from which all intruders must come. Behind him rose the tall sierras, one above another, in grand confusion, until their snowy summits seemed to pierce the sky. The little stream gleamed at his feet. The pine woods rose before him, and night birds, on silent wings, flitted by in the gloom. There is something in the solitude of a mountain region which inspires the beholder with awe. The great mountains, the low wind, the thousand sights and sounds which go to constitute a grand whole, fill the mind with wonder. In the presence of such works, man feels his own inferiority, and acknowledges the greatness of the

Creator of all. So it was with Herbert Brayton. By nature careless, full of gayety, he recognized in all he saw a great controlling power. In one of those waking dreams into which we sometimes fall, even in the day time, he did not see a figure which glided swiftly by him, in the direction of the cavity in which the prisoners were placed. It went like a shadow, and was lost to view. Ten minutes after, the same figure came back, and stood earnestly regarding the drowsy guard. At last it approached him, and suddenly snatched the gun from his hand. He rose and made a motion to fling himself upon the intruder, when the moon, which had been hidden by the top of a lofty peak, wheeled slowly into sight, and he saw that he was confronted by a woman! A glorious woman, too; such a one as we never see in cities, where grace of body is lost in multifarious devices of fashion. She was dressed in a style suited for rude frontier life. A sort of kirtle of bright-colored fabric, depending a little below the knee; a pair of Turkish trowsers, bound at the ankles; a dainty moccasin, ornamented with beads. Her hair was unconfined and swept about her person like a mantle. It was of rich golden brown, and was only kept back from her face by a fillet of blue ribbon. Her face was browned by exposure, but was clearly cut, and had a world of decision in it. Surprise held Herbert Brayton speechless, and he stood gazing at the strange vision without uttering a word. Seeing his indecision, she grasped him by the wrist and led him away from the door, so that what they said might not reach the ears of those inside.

"Who are you?" he managed to say.

"It does not matter who I am," she answered. "I am one who comes and goes as she will, saves when she *can*, and destroys when she *must*. Why have you come to this place? It is not safe."

"Gold!" replied Herbert.

"Ay, indeed," she said, scornfully, "gold is the idol of many, and has lured thousands to destruction. You are not the first who has dared to penetrate this place. Do you know the name of this spot?"

"I do not."

"It is called Dead Man's Gulch!"

"A delightful name," said Herbert, laughing lightly; "I am charmed with it."

"Silence!" she said, in a tone of anger; "you make a jest of that which has been the death of many. You are treading on the heels of a secret which *must* be kept. No man can come with safety to Dead Man's Gulch, whose hand has not already lifted the veil. Do not speak to me; I am here to warn you that you are treading upon hollow soil. A volcano slumbers under your feet, which may break out at any moment. I have the power now to save you, which will not be mine to-morrow. Tell your comrades, at the early morning, to take their gold and go from this place, never to return. An hour lost may be a life lost as well."

"Lady," said Herbert, "hear me. I do not understand this. You order us to go, and speak of an indefinite peril; how shall we know that this is not a plot to drive us from this place, where we have every prospect of riches?"

"Men are the same always; I repeat that you are in no common danger, I can not tell you *what*. If you go away from here to-morrow, all will be well. Will you go?"

"That remains with my companions," said Herbert calmly. "If they say go, it shall be done; if they say stay, we shall stay; and it will take all the power of Jake Dodd and his murdering gang to drive us from the place."

The girl, for she was nothing more than a girl, started at the name of the robber,

"Jake Dodd!" she cried. "What do you know of him? You have heard of the man, but do you know him as he is? You know that he robs and murders for the sake of gold. It has been told you at the camp-fires, when the hunters were tired of the chase, and sit down to rest; he has been painted to you as a villain black as night."

"And is he not?" demanded Herbert.

"Who that has seen him has the power to do him justice? Not one. His villainy can not be told by any ordinary tongue. Well, then, since you have heard of this man, do you not fear him? Do you dare to stay longer in this place? I beg you to go."

"We will not be driven out in this manner. Look for your self; the cabin is strong, and will resist the efforts of any

ordinary party ; nothing short of artillery could break down the wall ; we will stand a siege before we will be driven out by Jake Dodd and his gang."

" Foolhardy ! You rush upon your own fate ; I tell you that it is impossible for you to elude the vigilance of Jake Dodd. He will find means to conquer you, be sure of that. Will you not listen to reason ? I wish to save you."

" Who are you ?"

" I am an unfortunate girl, whose name can be of no use to you ; it is my fate to be connected with associations which are hateful to me, but which I can not elude. It is enough that I know your danger and wish to save you."

" We have a safeguard from Jake Dodd," said Herbert ; " let him know from us that if he attempts to do us an injury, Slippery Sam will die."

A shudder passed over her frame.

" I will not affect not to know the man you mean ; but I am losing time. Take my warning to heart, and leave this fatal spot in the morning, and all will be well."

She turned to leave him, but he sprang forward and caught her by the arm, in a firm but gentle clasp.

" You must not leave me thus, lady ; you must tell me who you are ; and give me the opportunity to thank you for the attempt to save my life, even though unsuccessful."

" Release me !" she cried.

" I can not, until you give me your name ; let me know whom I must thank for this kindness."

" A poor kindness, you will say in the morning," she replied. " Take your hand from my arm ; I will *not* be held ; my name I will not give."

" Then go your way," he said in a sad tone, releasing his hold upon her arm, " and take my thanks for having done so much for us."

She turned to go away, and then came back to him for another attempt to make him promise to leave. He would not promise unless his friends were willing. Seeing the uselessness of striving with him, she put her hands to her forehead and darted away, and he hurried back to waken his companions and tell them the strange adventure. The moment Tom heard it, he grasped a pistol and ran down

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toward their prison. When he reached it, he found only some pieces of cord upon the ground; an empty nest and the birds flown. Their nocturnal visitor had set the prisoners free!

Who could it have been?" said Herbert.

"It don't matter," said Tom, in a gloomy tone; "we are done for. I knew what would happen if we kept those fellows so long. No more peace now; we must dig with our pistols by our sides, ready for a fight."

"Then you don't mean to leave?"

"Not a bit of it; if Jake Dodd and Slippery Sam can drive us out, let them; but it is the opinion of the young man Carden that they will have to fight for it."

"Is that your opinion, too?" asked the young sailor, turning to James.

"I stand by Tom," was the reply.

"And what says young hopeful—the boy with the man's head on his shoulders?"

"Yer kin count on me," said the boy. "We kin lick a tribe of Jake Dodds. Who is afraid? I ain't, any how. Whoop! we kin lick them jist as *easy*—"

"Then it is settled" said Herbert; "we stay. My visitor was determined that I should promise to go away in the morning. I would not do it.

"I can't see her motive in warning you," said Tom in a musing tone. "It is plain she knows all about the gang; a child of one of them, perhaps."

"Impossible!"

"Oh, no, not at all; many of the fellows were gentlemen who are driven to this course of life by laziness, more than anything else; but where do they stay? That puzzles me; they must have a ranch somewhere."

"She was in earnest, was she? Perhaps she kept you talking so that the fellows could slip away. For my part, I don't see how they managed to get by you; were you asleep?"

"No, I don't think so. She crept up and snatched the gun out of my hand, and I was going to strike her when the moon shone in her face and I saw that it was a woman. And she was earnest in her desire to save me; there were tears in her

eyes. There are no better or truer women than her in the world; I'll stake my life on it."

"I *won't*," said Tom. "No doubt she is as good as the average, but I don't trust a woman. Where did she come from? Did she drop from the skies?"

They left the cave and went back to the cabin. For the rest of that night they did not sleep, but sat discussing their future course. It was decided to remain and fight, if necessary to retain the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE TOILS.

To their surprise the young men enjoyed uninterrupted labor for more than two weeks, during which time Billy succeeded in making the life of Jan Ling a burden to him by various tricks which his fertile brain devised for the annoyance of the Chinaman. Jan passed his life in a constant terror of traps laid for his unwary feet by the mischievous fellow. Herbert remonstrated with him, but with little or no effect. It is natural, in California, to oppress John Chinaman, to the shame of the miners be it spoken, though as a class, they are the most inoffensive and laborious men in the Golden State. Billy had imbibed the national prejudice against John Chinaman, and though he acknowledged that Jan Ling was a faithful fellow, he could not help enjoying himself a little at his expense.

One day while the boy was working at a pocket in the side of the gulch, a hundred rods away from the rest of the miners, he felt a sharp pain in his arm, and knew that he was hit by an arrow. His first thought was that Indians were at hand, and he shouted to his companions, while he ran from the immediate vicinity of the hill at full speed. Laying hold of the arrow to pull it out, he found that it had done no more than to pierce the skin and hung in his coat sleeve. A paper was wrapped about the shaft, which he took off, just as Tom Carden, out of breath with haste, met him.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What have you seen?"

"Somebody has been making me a present," replied Billy. "I'm thankful to him, whoever he is."

"An arrow!" cried Tom.

"Yes, and a love-letter from a gal, too," said Billy, holding up the piece of paper. "Queer way of sending letters, ain't it? Rather *pointed*, I may say."

Tom snatched the letter from him and opened it. There, traced in a delicate hand, he read these words:

"You have but a few hours in which to save yourselves. Forewarned—forearmed! To-morrow the bolt falls! Take your gold and go. I have done what I could to save you."

This, without date or signature, was all that could be found.

"Where did you get this?" asked Tom.

"It was wrapped round the arrow," said Billy.

"Then it is evident that she did not intend to kill you, but merely to call your attention to the arrow."

"Then she made it out," said Billy, rubbing his arm. "She called my attention to it; yes, she *did*. There's no doubt of that. Who is she, any way? and who give her the right to shoot arrows at decent people, without as much as saying, 'by your leave?'"

"It is our midnight visitor," said Herbert. "There can be no doubt of that. Now then, her warning is plain. The question is, shall we profit by it, and get away with what we have, or shall we stay for the chance of getting more, with the plain prospect of losing all."

"How many ounces have we?" asked Tom.

"About six hundred."

"According to that, after paying Jan Ling, and necessary expenses, we shall have about twenty-five hundred apiece. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"And leave ten times that amount in the claim and on the surface too. I won't go, for one."

"Nor I," said James.

"Nor I," quoth Billy. "If I do I'm a seed."

"You can not be more determined to stay than I am," said Herbert. "For other reasons besides the lack of money, I

am not going to leave the place. My advice is, let us make our cabin as strong as we can, keep a good look-out every hour of the day, and fight hard if they try to drive us off."

"Who can this girl be that takes such an interest in your welfare, Herbert?" said James. "You say she is good looking."

"She was beautiful," said the young man, earnestly. "I would give all this gold we have taken out, my share, I mean, for a sight of her face once more."

"Just so," said the cynical Tom. "Now I would not give eight ounces for the sight of a thousand such faces. I'm none too much in love with her for letting Slippery Sam and his companion go. If she had not done that we should have a safeguard now. While we held them prisoners, we were safe."

They cut down several trees which obstructed their view of the mouth of the ravine, and added several logs to the cabin where they seemed needed, constructed a stout set of bars for the door, and made small loopholes for rifles. When this was done they declared themselves ready to stand a siege. The chief difficulty was provisions. They had plenty of jerked venison, but they had been living on the fat of the land lately, and they did not like the change. At five o'clock Herbert went out with James to shoot a string of quail, for they were determined to have one more feast before they gave themselves up to the unsavory jerked meat. Leaving the ravine behind them, they climbed to the table-land, and were soon playing havoc among the myriads of quail which were rising in every direction. Near the spot where James had met Slippery Sam upon a former occasion, they sat down to rest.

"Look yer!" cried a harsh voice.

Both started quickly to their feet. Half a dozen men stood near them, who had started up from the bushes on every side, each with a loaded pistol in his hand, which they held ready to fire at the first attempt to escape. The men were stout-built fellows, counterparts of Slippery Sam and his friend Jake Dodd. The spokesman was Slippery Sam himself. An expression of triumphant malice lighted up his swarthy face, and he fingered the hilt of the pistol as if wishing to fire,

and yet desiring to sport with his victims. The rest of the men were masked.

"The table's turned," he cried, in malicious glee. "You thought to get the better of Slippery Sam and keep it. I told you it couldn't be done. I told you the time would come when I would have you as tight as you had me, and I have kept my word."

"Cease brawling, fellow," said Herbert, "and do what it is appointed for you to do. Are you going to kill us now? That is the question."

"That's the question, is it? Where is that dog who was so loud-mouthed against me when we were in your hands?"

"Find out," said James.

"We mean to. Clint Badger and Pete Sayers, stand by these two with your pistols, and if they offer to bolt, *give* it to em. Madge don't dare to say any thing if they are killed trying to escape. The rest of you come here."

They grouped together on the green sward a little away from the prisoners, and entered into an animated discussion, as to whether the prisoners had not better die then, to save trouble in the future. Two of them were for instant execution, but the others were as strenuously opposed to it. They appeared to dread the anger of some unknown person, and nothing could induce them to consent to the death of the two prisoners.

"Let *her* have her way," said one. "It's no use flying in *her* face. We know that whatever she tells Jake to do he's bound to do. So what's the use? *She* said, 'see that no harm is done except to save your own lives,' and string my hide if it ain't a-goin' to be as she says. Durn it, don't *she* know?"

"How should she know as well as a man?" said Slippery Sam. "I ain't got no good will to either of the two, and if it was that other sneak at the cabin, the long Yankee they call Tom, no woman living would keep me from sending a bullet through his head, and leaving his body for the buzzards. My plan for these youngsters now, is to tie them back to back, put half a dozen balls through them, and drop them into the gulch yonder."

"You ain't *got* your way though, Sam, and it's just as well you havn't. Mind, it's got to be as *she* says."

"Who told you to set yourself up against me, Dave Hutchins?" cried Sam, angrily. "I've drawed a knife on a man for less than you've said to-night, and I kin do it again."

"I hope you don't think I'm any ways skeery of *you*, Sam," said the man called Hutchins. "I *hope* you ain't got no such notions in your noddle, 'cause if you *hev* they are wrong. I ain't one of thet kind of bird. You can't do any thing with me. I kin use a knife, too, if it is needed, perhaps as well as you. Don't try to skeer me, Sammy, my boy. I think too much of you for *that*."

"You're bluffing me, hoss. I kin see *that* plain enough. None of your nonsense, Dave. It won't go down. Fust thing you know I'll have out this little rib-tickler of mine, and cut you. Don't anger me, Dave."

"*You* can't lick me, Sam Bagot."

"Oh, I can; just as *easy*."

"Say it low," replied Dave, "or I might *hear* you, and if I did, I'd make it worse for you. Don't try to come the old soldier over me. If you mean fight, draw yer knife and at it. If yer mean bluff, don't let us waste any more time, that's all."

Sam looked at the speaker without speaking. The bearing of the man rather balked him, and though not disinclined to a jostle, he postponed it to some more convenient time. What might have been the result of all this banter can not be said, for they were interrupted by the report of a pistol, fired by one of the guards. Turning they saw that James Davis was gone, and that the pistol had gone off of its own accord, since its owner was rolling headlong on the sod.

A few words will explain the changed aspect of affairs. The young men had remained quiet under the hands of their captors, but watching for an opportunity to escape. The two guards, seeing that their prisoners were quiescent, turned their attention to the quarrel going on between Slippery Sam and Dave Hutchins. This was the opportunity James waited for, and knocking down the nearest man, he tripped up the heels of the other at the same moment, and disappeared from view. Close to the place where they stood, the table-land ended

abruptly in an almost perpendicular descent, down which Davis plunged recklessly, daring the perilous descent rather than remain a prisoner in the hands of such enemies as these. He knew that it would have been mistaken friendship in him to remain in bonds because Herbert was taken, and that he could do him more good free, than he could a prisoner. When Slippery Sam gained the edge of the precipice, the escaping prisoner was far down the rocks, leaping narrow ravines, swinging himself from point to point, and making all haste to get out of gun-shot. Herbert had endeavored to follow his example, but catching his foot in the long grass he had fallen prostrate. Before he could rise, he was held by two strong men, with pistols at his head. Slippery Sam raised his rifle and drew a fine bead on James. But the erratic course of that worthy rendered any thing like a sure aim impossible. He fired, however, and they saw that the bullet struck the quartz about ten inches from the body of Davis; too near to be pleasant, but wide enough of its mark for all practical purposes.

One after another the band tried the range of their rifles, but without success. He kept steadily on his course, and buried himself in the bushes at the bottom of the slope. Slippery Sam was in ecstasies of rage, and grasped his remaining prisoner by the throat. Dave Hutchins in turn seized him, and dragged him away.

"No yer don't, Sam! Mind I tell yer I won't stand by and see it done. This yer boy is a *prisoner*. Don't tech a feller when he's held."

"Hands off, Dave!" cried Sam, hoarsely. "Hands off, I tell you. Don't you see thet he's off?"

"Its yer own fault," said Dave. "Yer would hev a talk about killing them in cold blood, and I wouldn't stand by and see it. If yer had taken them away in the first place, 'twould hev been all right."

Part of the fellows sided with Dave and part with his opponent. Pistols were drawn and they separated, and a bloody fray seemed imminent, when a sweet but commanding voice was heard, ordering them to put up their weapons. All turned in the direction of the voice, and saw the midnight visitor at Dead Man's Gulch. She was dressed as upon that occasion.

with the exception of a knife and pistol thrust into a girdle at her waist.

"What does this mean?" she cried, turning a half-savage glance around the circle of astonished faces. "Why are weapons drawn? Speak, Samuel Bagot. If there is any quarreling, you are sure to have a hand in it. What does it mean, Hutchins? That fellow will not speak."

"Waal," said Hutchins. "We fell out about the prisoner. He was for making an end of him at once, and I told him you said as how no one was to be hurt."

"And he was determined to shed blood, as usual? How is it that I see but one prisoner here? There should be *two*."

"The other is off," replied Hutchins. "He didn't admire our style, and refused to stay. He jumped down that slope, Miss Madge."

"That is bad, very bad. How could you be so careless? However, it only complicates the work we must do. Bagot, you must remain here with two men. The rest take the prisoner, and come with me. Bagot, you know when and where to make your report. For our safety, it is necessary to clear Dead Man's Gulch as soon as possible. Now, Hutchins, see to the prisoner."

"Stop a moment," said Herbert. "Will you allow me a few moments' conversation with you?"

"What can you have to say to me?" she said. "I do not know that it will do any good."

"I *must* speak to you," said the young man, eagerly. "I must know something of you. Who are you, strange being? Send these men aside. I promise not to attempt to escape."

"You promise! You *can not* escape. Bagot, take your men, and go about the work allotted to you. Hutchins, go out of ear-shot. This person shall have the interview he desires."

The orders were obeyed instantly, with a passive acknowledgment of her power, which astonished the prisoner, who was more and more surprised by the things which he saw. The men were gone, but he did not know how to begin. She stood there, cold and proud, striking at the long grass with a stick she carried in her hand.

"Well, sir?" she said, in an inquiring tone. "May I ask

what you have to say to me? If you have nothing to say, we lose time."

"I had much to say," replied Herbert, "but I do not know how to begin. Yesterday I thought you were my friend; to-day I know that I am your prisoner, for it is impossible not to see that you have supreme power over these men. I do not understand this."

"Others have been in the same predicament," was the calm reply. "Others have tried to fathom the secret of the power I hold over the robbers of the pass. The secret of my power is known to the band and to me. It is enough for me that I *have* the power, and use it."

"Why are you so hard-hearted? How can you, young, beautiful, with every thing about you to lead you into a pleasant life, remain in the midst of a savage band, whose sole thought is to get gold, no matter how blood-stained it must be?"

"It matters not," she answered; "I am one whom hard fortune has driven to madness, and to whom this wild life is a relief. It is useless to speak of it. Whatever I am, I have made *myself*. I do not enter it blindfold; it is done of my own free will and accord. Circumstances beyond my control have placed me here, and I am not one to fight against fate. The time was when I struggled, when I tried to put away from me the inevitable, but that is gone."

"But you have been friendly to us, you have tried to save us. Why do you turn against us now?"

"I did what I could. I told you then that after that day it would be out of my power to save you. Why did you not listen to me? Why did you not go away? Once out of the mountains, there would be comparative safety for you. As for your companions, and especially for the one who has just escaped, there can be no safety in California. He must go to the States."

"Why?"

"He has incurred the anger of one who will never rest until he has wiped out in blood an insult offered him. I may say the same of the other. I sent you a message to-day. Why did you not heed it?"

"We had made up our minds not to be driven from the mine. We are doing well and did not like to leave."

"What were you doing on the table-land?"

"We were hunting."

"You see how wrong you were. You see how utterly you have destroyed yourselves. The men had received their orders. If you did not come this way, but took your goods and turned back toward the settlements, no one would have molested you in the least. But gold, the prime mover in the hearts of men, would not let you do as you ought. What fools men are!"

"I was bound in honor to stand by those who had saved my life."

"The men who attacked you made a mistake. You were not the man they sought; they wanted that man Davis. They mistook you for him."

"Ah, we thought so, but the motive?"

"Never mind the motive. And now to yourself. You are going on an uncertain journey. I do not know how it will end. It may be life, it may be death. But whether the one or the other, you can not say that I have not warned you fairly. I would have saved you. Do not ask who I am. It is labor wasted. You can see *what* I am, and that is enough for you. I am still your friend, as far as my power goes, but that does not extend to setting you free. I have my duty to do, even to these lawless men."

"Where do we go?"

She pointed up the mountain. "Our path leads yonder."

"Up the sierras!" he exclaimed in surprise. "What can we do there?"

"You shall see," she said, "or rather you shall *not* see. When we pass yonder ragged rock, you will be blindfolded. Hutchins, secure your prisoner. Now, forward."

They pressed on up the slope. At the rock they paused, and his eyes were carefully bandaged. From that time, he was led forward, over a difficult path.

CHAPTER V.

GONE!

ARTHUR HALEY was not a regular inhabitant of Oreton City. Indeed he only visited there four or five times in the course of a year. What his business was no one knew or cared to inquire. California is full of men who have no visible employment. It is enough for the enterprising landlords that they have money, and are not backward in spending it. Every one in Oreton knew that Haley had plenty of money, and in a certain vainglorious way, was willing to spend it. The matron who claimed to be mother of Ida, saw at once how much better it would be to marry her daughter to a man who already had money, than to one who had yet to "make a raise," in the common parlance of the country. Ever since the time James left the place, she had given her daughter no rest. She must marry Arthur Haley. He was rich, the very man for her, and would send her to the States, where she could live a lady. But, Ida would not hear of it. In her own way she could be quite as well-born as her mother, and was as fully determined not to marry Haley, as the mother was that she should.

"Why are you so slow?" said the good lady to the backward swain. "You never speak to the girl."

"She gives me no encouragement," he answered, sullenly.

"That is your foolish notion," replied the old lady. "Of course you can't expect my girl to ask you to have her! If you do, you deserve to be beaten, as you will be. I only wish that James Davis was as tongue-tied as you are."

"You are right after all," said he. "I will ask her to-day."

"Then you shall have a chance. Go down toward Oreton and wait for her at the point of woods. I will send her down on an errand, and you will have a chance to ask her. If you let her get away without saying yes, you ought to lose her."

"What if she says no?"

"That may be. Probably she *will* at first. But, don't let her go with that. She is a saucy little flirt, and may say no to spite you. I think she likes you."

"And I think she likes Jim Davis. If she does—if I find that she dares to put him before me, I will have his heart's blood. They don't know me yet in Oreton. I have never forgotten or forgiven the insults I received at the hotel. When I have settled affairs with Miss Ida, I will see after him."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Yes."

"How did you find out? I am sure you have not left Oreton since he went away. Or perhaps some one who came in from the sierras had seen him? May be he has made a raise?"

"He has," he answered.

"Dear me; you don't tell me *that*? I am quite proud of the boy, and pleased that he has **been** so lucky. I might have known that he would be sure to do well. I am sure I can't blame my girl for liking him, for he *is* a handsome fellow and not afraid to speak for himself. I like to see a young man have something to say."

Good Mrs. Hayes recognized the advisability of having two strings to her bow. And if James Davis had become "available," she certainly would encourage him.

"I am sure," she said, relenting, "I am sorry if I ever said any thing against the boy."

"That is to say," said Haley, "if I don't suit, and Davis has more money than I have, you are ready to take him?"

"I said nothing of the kind, I am sure," said Mrs. Hayes. "You must work for yourself. Go down to the woods and wait. Ida shall come down in half an hour."

Haley, in no good humor, left the ranche and walked down to the wood. Passing through, he sat down at the foot of a giant tree, and waited. Soon after, Ida left the ranche and came slowly down toward him, swinging a small basket on her arm. She never looked more bewitching than at that moment. Watching her from his cover, Haley saw her stoop by the side of a hollow log which lay moldering by the path, half-covered by the brushwood, and put in her hand, as if in

search of something. She was evidently disappointed, for her sweet face clouded in a moment, and she sat down on the log and covered her face. This was the "post-office" which James used in communicating with her. She did not really expect a letter, and it was more from habit than any thing else that she looked for one. It had been her custom, too, ever since he went away, to write a letter often, and put it in the log, against his return. It was a foolish fancy, but then they were in love!

Haley, thinking it a good opportunity to speak, left his hiding-place and came toward her. She looked up at him with any thing but a pleased expression upon her face, for she suspected some plot on the part of her mother and her would-be lover. But she could do no less than return his greeting, and he sat down on the log at her side. With a woman's instinct, she formed a barrier by placing the basket between them.

"Were you waiting for me?" he said, with the disagreeable smile which marred his face. "I hope so."

"No!" she said, shortly. "I was waiting to please my own fancy."

"How can you be so hard-hearted? Do you know why I stay so long in Oreton, Ida?"

"I am sure I can't guess," she said. "If I were you, I should not find any great inducement to stay here. It must be a disagreeable place."

He looked at her intently.

"I think you are trying to quiz me," he said, in the sulky tone he used when beginning to get angry. "If you are, I advise you to drop it. I am not in a mood for it. Why don't you ask why I stay here?"

"Oh, I don't care," she replied. "If you like to stay here, of course you *will*; I can't stop you. But, I must not stay here. Mother sent me to the village in a great hurry to get some spices, and I must go."

"You want to get rid of me," he said.

"How quick you do take one up!" she replied, laughing. "You are so sharp. Now I'm off."

"Wait a moment. I am determined that you shall ask me why I stay in this dull place."

"Well, well, if I must: *why* do you?"

"Because *you* won't let me go away."

"Dear me; how *very* odd! Then, if *that* is all, you have my free consent to go whenever it is your sovereign will and pleasure. I would not keep you for the world. To think that I should have been so wicked as to keep you here! But, I won't do so any more; I won't indeed."

His brow grew dark again, and began to take on a look of threatening, such as she had seen on it once before, and which repelled her. She rose to go, but he caught her by the wrist and pulled her down into the seat on the log. There was something in his look which awed her, and she sat looking at him with half-opened lips, and a terrified expression in her eyes. He saw this and laughed.

"Pshaw!" he said, "you are frightened. You have no need to be; only don't be so wicked. You know that I want to talk to you."

"But, I have no time to talk now."

"You did seem to have time when you sat down here just now. What were you looking for in the log?"

She looked every way except at his face, as she replied,

"Moss."

"I did not know that moss grew on the *inside* of logs," said he, laughing. "I will look in and see what you have hidden here."

"Oh, don't bother me," she answered. "Come, I am going to the village. Will you go with me?"

The request satisfied him that something was wrong. He stooped and thrust his hand into the cavity, and drew it out holding half a dozen letters, all in her handwriting, and directed to "Mr. James Davis."

"My friend Davis is fortunate," he said, in a bitter tone running them over quickly. "It is rather odd how these came here. Moss! Oh, *yes*."

"Give me the letters," she said, breathless.

"I could not think of it," said he, coolly. "They shall be handed to the owner, if he is above ground. If he is dead, as I suppose, he shall have them put into his grave. It will be a delicate compliment to him to give them that sort of burial. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Will you give me the letters?"

"Excuse me. If they were yours, now—"

"They *are* mine."

"You wrote them?"

"I did."

He put them into his pocket with a light laugh, and seized both her hands in his. "Come, my dear, let us be friends. Why need we quarrel? Come, you shall have your letters, and you shall give me a very little thing for them."

"And that is—"

"Something of this kind."

He kissed her lips. She disengaged one hand and struck him so hard upon the cheek with the flat of her hand that her fingers tingled to their very tips. He drew back with a crimson mark upon his cheek, where one of her rings, which had turned upon her finger, had cut him. He clapped his hand to the spot and drew it away bloody. The sight of the blood seemed to rouse all the tiger in his nature, and he seized her about the waist, and forced her to sit beside him on the log. She had never seen him so before, but, being a brave little girl, determined not to be frightened, and struggled with him fiercely. "Sit still!" he cried. "You *shall* listen to me."

"You had better take your hand off my shoulder, you coward," was the spirited reply. "Who are you? Does any one know where you came from? I don't believe they do."

His black brows knit fiercely, and he closed his hand upon her shoulder so savagely that she cried out for pain, and struggled again. "Who put that into your head?" he said, fiercely. "I wager every thing I am worth that it was no other than that scoundrel Davis, whom I have sworn to kill. Listen to me, my girl, would you like to have your lover live and be happy?"

"At least, he has no fear of any thing *you* can do to him, coward!"

"Don't be so free with that word, my girl. That makes twice you have insulted me to-day. Beware of the third. I don't count the blow; that was a love pat."

"If you would not hold me, you should have another of the same sort," she cried. "Will you give me my letters and let me go?"

"By no means. I am improving my mind. It has come into my head that I had better keep them and get an idea in the composition of love-letters. I need it so much. But, a truce to jesting. I have done with it from this hour. Let me hear you speak, girl? Let me hear you say that you do not love James Davis and will be my wife."

"You will wait a long time if you wait for that, sir. I shall make no such promises to you or to any other man unless of my own free will."

"It is for your own and his good that I say what I do in reference to this matter," he added, slowly. "You are putting his life in jeopardy every hour. Do you know where he is? Of course you do not. I do. Far up the Sierras, there is a deep glen known as Dead Man's Gulch. Would you like to know how it gained the name? I will tell you: No man ever entered that gulch, except he who knows the secret of the place, and came out alive. Your lover is *there*. Without my help he will die; do you hear? he will die; and his bones whiten under the sun of the sierras."

She did not struggle any more, but sat looking at him with a white, calm face which startled him. He had heard of women who loved so well that they would avenge a slain lover's blood. Ida had a look like that on her face. He hastened to avert it.

"There is one way to save him. I have the clue; be kind to me, and he shall leave the Gulch alive and rich."

"Do you know what I will do if James does not come back safe from this prospecting tour? I will kill you!"

He started back in terror. She would keep her word; the California girls are made of sterner stuff than their weaker sisters in the States.

"You have seen me shoot at a mark," Ida went on to say. "I could cover you with a pistol at twenty paces and shoot you down, as I would a wild cat; and if James dies in the mountains, after what you have said, it will be at your own peril if you come in my way. I never will rest until I have killed you, and there is no law in California which will touch me for the deed."

"You are driving me mad," he said, in a hoarse tone. "There, go—pass on your way; before many days, yes,

before many hours, you shall know what it is to make me angry."

He released her, and she hurried on toward the village. He watched her out of sight, and then struck off toward the hills behind the village, going at a rapid pace, never looking behind him. A half-hour's walk brought him to a deep glen, closed on all sides by rocks and trees, the very place of all others to concoct evil deeds. There he met two men, heavily armed, and the three sat down and talked for some hours. The men evidently had traveled long and fast, for their mocasins were torn and their looks weary. Both were dark-browed, evidently used to a rough life, and ready for any deed. The conversation was carried on in low tones, but very earnest; at last Haley rose to go.

"You understand me, then; meet me in two hours at the point of woods above the village. We must be very careful in doing this job. Does *she* know any thing about it?"

"You know well enough she never interferes in any thing of this kind. The only thing she will insist on is that you shall marry the girl."

"It looks a little hard that men like us should be so completely controlled by a *woman*," said Haley; "though for that matter, few men would have kept us together as she has done, or held the secret of the Retreat so well. She knows the errand upon which you come?"

"Not exactly; she knows what it is that keeps you here, and depends upon your services. When you sent for two men, she asked no questions, but told us to go."

"Very well; in two hours, remember, I shall be at the point of woods waiting for you. Don't stay beyond your time, for our work must be done well. It will not do to have the whole ranche on our backs."

"Have they a dog?"

"They *had* one," said Haley, "a very good one, but the poor animal died to-day, poisoned by some one. It is a remarkable thing. One would suppose that he died just to clear the way for us, though, of course, *that* is impossible."

The men laughed.

"You are a genius, Arthur. It would be rough on you if they found out in the village who you really are, wouldn't it?"

"Rather," said he drily; "but I don't propose that they shall find out. Why, the old lady is fast to have me marry the girl, as eager for it as I am."

The men laughed again, with a rough compliment or two on the prowess of Haley. He left them and returned to the village. It was about half past eight when he entered the hotel and ordered some supper. After eating, he looked at his watch and found that he had about an hour to spare, and went out on the piazza, where, sitting in a dark corner, he heard a group of miners on the other end talking of the gang of robbers who had lately come out in force at the foot-hills. For nearly a year they had been remarkably quiet, but now were at their work again with new spirit. There was one peculiarity in their mode of robbing, and an evident desire to avoid bloodshed. All the men of the band, in their excursions went masked. No one, in the last year, who had been robbed, could say that he had seen the faces of any of the men who had robbed him. One of the party had just been relieved of about forty ounces, not five miles from the village. Having stripped him of his valuables, they let him go with an enjoiner to be careful of his health. Arthur listened to them with a lurking smile on his face.

"It can't be the band of Jake Dodd," said the man who had been robbed; "they never would have let me go; I should be lying on one of the foot-hills with a ball through my head; I got off remarkably easy. All I have to say is, it's lucky I didn't have all my dust with me. That would have been too hard; it's bad enough to lose forty ounces, but what is that to three hundred?"

"Have you got as much as that?"

"Yes."

"Where do you keep it, then? You ought to carry it to one of the towns and sell it; three hundred ounces is too much to have about you."

"I'm going to take it away with me to-morrow morning to San Francisco. I've made enough to go to the States; I've thirty thousand in the bank at 'Frisco, and this will make me

about right. I know what thirty-five thousand dollars is in the States ; it makes a man independent like. So, I'm off to-morrow."

It is not singular that this talkative personage was stopped next day on the road to San Francisco, and relieved of the three hundred ounces of which he had talked so loudly.

About five minutes after the miner's confession, Arthur, who had been writing something on a scrap of paper, under the dim light of the outside lamp, rose and left the place. Stopping at a door about a dozen houses down the street he gave a peculiar rap which was answered from within.

"Who knocks there?" demanded a loud voice.

"One who knows a cloudy night from moonlight," was the answer; "when the pigeons fly, hawks should be abroad."

There was a rattling of bolts, and the door swung open, showing a stalwart fellow in the doorway.

"Who is it?" he said, bending forward to get a look at the face of the other.

"Arthur."

"Come in, will you?"

"Can't stop," said Arthur, giving him the paper. "Fly the hawks at this game and send the dust to the place you know of Good-night."

The door swung to again, and Arthur turned up the road, toward the point of woods where he had promised to meet his friends. The unexpected business which he had been obliged to do had kept him behind his time, and the men were waiting. Both wore black masks which entirely covered the upper part of their faces.

"I'm a little behind my hour," said Arthur; "I had to give the hawks warning of a flight of birds. Do you know I met a fellow just now who has been robbed of forty ounces? It occurred to me that I knew who did the job for him. Two men with black masks did it."

"Wonderful!" said one of the men, while the other burst into a laugh; "you take away my breath. So the poor fellow lost the dust?"

"Which you have pouched safely; don't deny it, my boy;

I know it was you. The same chap starts to-morrow for 'Frisco, with three hundred ounces. It would be funny if he were to lose it."

Both men appeared to think this such an excellent joke that they very nearly burst with suppressed laughter. When this had subsided, Arthur took out a black mask, exactly like the others, and covered his face, and they moved forward toward the ranche of Mr. Hayes. It was now nearly ten o'clock and all was quiet about the ranche. There was only one light in the building, and that was in a bedroom on the ground floor.

"That's her room," whispered Arthur; "and, confound it, she is awake yet."

"What shall we do?" said one of his companions.

"Nothing for it but to wait," answered Arthur, angrily, "I think I'll take a peep at her; may be she has left the candle burning by accident and has gone to sleep."

He crept cautiously up to the window, and looked within. Ida sat with her back to the window, her head resting on the table. She evidently had fallen asleep, for the candle had burned so long untrimmed that the wick had been clogged and gave but a dim light. Nothing could be more opportune. Beckoning his companions, they took off their shoes and approached the window, which she had left open to let in the fresh air. The window-sill was low, so that it was but a step from the ground to the carpeted floor.

Arthur entered first, and one of his companions followed him and stood close behind Ida's chair. The first movement of Haley was to bolt the door upon the inside. All this time the girl never stirred. With a quick movement, the villain who stood behind her chair covered her mouth and nostrils with his broad hand. She awoke struggling, but unable to cry out, and became conscious that a tall man, with a black mask, was holding a pistol to her head. It was evident that any noise on her part would be her death-warrant, so she submitted quietly to be gagged and bound. This done, she was received by another man in a black mask. The others followed, and she was compelled to walk rapidly between two of them to the woods, from which the men presently brought three horses, saddled and bridled. She was placed on one,

the gag removed after a hint that if she made any outcry they would gag her again, and the two mounted, riding one on each side of her. One remained, watching them silently as they turned their horses' heads toward the distant hills.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE PRISON.

THE captors of Herbert Dayton walked silently by his side, and the strange girl who appeared to command them moved in front, without a word or look at him. He watched her earnestly and tried in vain to solve the riddle. A beautiful woman, apparently the acknowledged leader of a band of robbers. He could not otherwise understand the respectful deference in which she was held by all. They held their course up the sierras, toward the distant peak, until the time when the bandage was placed upon his eyes. He knew that he was going up into a rarer atmosphere, until the breath came hard, and a sense of oppression which always increases with the ascent of a mountain, fell upon him. After a time this changed, and he felt that they were descending, and soon the breath of fragrant flowers, which grow in unnumbered beauty and luxuriance, came to his nostrils. The bandage was removed, and he looked about him with surprise.

Where was he? In front he saw a fertile valley about a league in length, with a small stream meandering through it. But where had they entered? On every side rose the peaks of the sierras, hemming them in. A cluster of cabins was built upon the banks of the little stream, about half a mile away; a number of horses fed upon the prairie, together with a drove of cattle. This strange oasis in the mountain desert was level as a floor, only covered with the flowers we have mentioned, while here and there, clinging to the slopes of the mountains, rose groves of stately pine and cedar. Looking toward the cabins, Herbert could see persons going in and out, and even women among them. Children played around the

doors or fished in the little stream. It was a picture of pastoral comfort which he could not comprehend. Was it possible that these rude men, whose lives were passed in plundering their kind, had such a home as this? He turned a look on the woman as though he would read her soul. She stood, calm as destiny, looking down into that happy valley.

"You see, sir," she said, "this is our secret. Before you, no man who had not sworn an oath to be true to our laws—an oath which is fearful to hear or to repeat—has trod this grass: no one would suspect that the sierras hemmed in so much loveliness; and yet, I doubt not, there are a dozen of such valleys as this, each in itself a paradise. I do not blame them that they are determined to keep it from the grasp of the harpies of the law. Before we go farther, let me have your word that you will not try to escape from us, while no attempt is made to do you harm."

"You have deprived me of the power," he said, in an earnest tone. "I could not go away from here if I would."

"Sir!"

"Your pardon; I spoke without thought, and yet I am not sorry that I said it."

"This is folly," she said, a flush mounting into her beautiful face; "you are ungrateful to say such things to me. Remember that we are not in the world you have lived in. This is our world, hemmed in, as you see, by the mountain peaks. In the world you have left, such speeches as you have made would pass current with the women—might even please them, if the speaker had their fancy; but what am I to you, or you to me?"

"I had hoped," he said, still sadly, "that, since you were kind enough to interest yourself in the fate of a humble individual like myself, you might—have a more than passing interest in me."

"Not more than in your companions. The interest in a common humanity," she answered proudly. He dropped his head without reply, and they passed down toward the cluster of cabins.

"I asked your promise not to escape, sir," she said, "and you answered me in a way I do not like. Be pleased to return a direct answer."

"I will not try to escape."

"Then I have to offer you the shelter of my house while you remain with us. It is impossible to say how long that will be. What a life I lead! What a life I *have* led, and must lead still! You are trying to study me, sir. You are trying to make out how it is that I, with every appearance of something better, have such associates as these. I hope you find the study interesting." There was a touch of anger in her tone which he could not fail to notice.

"I could not help having some thoughts on the subject," he said, in an apologetic tone.

By this time they had arrived at the miniature village. He saw that the houses were built of pine logs, squared with an ax and notched at the ends. The "chinks" were filled with a kind of cement found in the bottom lands. There were no windows, but simply openings to let in light and air. One of the houses was larger than the others, and at the door of this Madge stopped and bade him enter. Her return was evidently expected, for a supper was smoking on the table, and a girl was putting some tea to draw, to whom she spoke pleasantly.

This girl was an Indian, but many of those whom Herbert saw outside were white woman. Madge invited him to a seat at the table by a graceful gesture, and sat down to pour out tea. She gave him for the meal savory venison steaks, quail and potatoes. When they had finished she again addressed him.

"Though you are in some sort a prisoner, sir, yet you will be allowed the liberty of the valley. The men are away and will be gone for a week. During that time, take what exercise you choose. There are horses; use them when you please, always remembering that you are bound in honor not to attempt an escape."

"You are very kind," he said. "Let me ask if any evil is likely to befall my friends."

"That rests with them; and I would not have them injured if I could help it. Handsome, brave, generous to a fault! You see I know them. It has been my part to study the characters of those who have entered Dead Man's Gulch. We have our reasons for wishing no one to enter there; good reasons. If they would confine themselves to the stream, all

would be well ; but these restless, adventurous spirits will not do that."

"Then your secret is connected with the gulch" he said, laughing. "Take care."

"You are not in a condition to avail yourself of that knowledge," she replied. "And if you were, I believe you generous enough not to take advantage of a slip of the tongue."

"You do me no more than justice," he replied, warmly. "I would not, indeed."

"I believe you. I have determined that you shall be free until the return of the captain of this band ;" a slight shudder passed through her frame as she pronounced the word. "He will decide what shall be done with you."

"I thought these men obeyed you."

"Implicitly, during his absence. But, when he returns, I have only a woman's power over him. I promise nothing ; I do not know that I can do you any good. You have my promise to be useful to you if I can, no more than that."

"Who is the captain of this band?"

"Do you not know?"

"I have heard it said that it is that assassin who takes the name of Jake Dodd."

"Yes, yes ; it is well that the ruffian should have the credit of his evil deeds. The captain of the band under that name has, indeed, done many a deed, which fill me with horror even in the recital. And yet he thought them necessary. Do not speak to me of the band or their captain. You will know them soon enough. There are few who would ask again to see the man you name, having seen him once. But, enough of this. That room is yours. Whenever you need any thing, ask the girl ; she has orders to attend to you. As for myself, I have been fatigued by a long march, and must retire."

He went into his room soon after, and stood at the open casement, looking out into the silent night. The prairie lay before him in calm beauty, with a silver streak running through it, from end to end. While he looked, he heard the clatter of hoofs, and shortly after ten men swept up from the end of the valley at which they had entered, and alighted. It was a portion of the band returned from the trail. Herbert, watching them closely, saw two of them presently break away from

the rest and come toward the house. He looked them over. One was the tall, scarred ruffian known as Jake Dodd; the other, a slender youth, to all appearance, with a face that looked in the moonlight so much like that of Madge that he started at the resemblance. He was dressed in a tight-fitting jacket of blue cloth, with metal buttons, a pair of loose pants, belted at the waist by a broad, leathern belt, and a Spanish cloak thrown over all. He wore a sombrero, and was armed simply with pistols. They came up to the door and entered without knocking, as if at home. The Indian girl met them, and gave the younger man a note which her mistress had given her before retiring."

"What is this?" he said.

"Señora give it me for El Capitan," she answered. "Say me give it when El Capitan come in."

He hummed a low tune as he opened it, and glanced over the contents. A strange look passed over his face.

"By the powers, Jake," he said "our little Madge has been making work for us while we have been gone. She has taken one of those intruders."

"Where is he?" demanded Jake, loudly.

"Hush!" said the other, pointing to the room in which Herbert was sitting. "He is there."

"Why was he brought here?" said Jake, sullenly. "My word for it, Charley, I do not like the idea. This is woman's work. She has some foolish scruples about bloodshed, and so betrays the secret we have kept so long. The retreat is no longer safe."

"Pshaw, man. We have the fellow in our power. But we will see him in the morning. For the present, I want something to eat. Our long ride has made me sharp set. Madge has retired, eh?"

"Si, Señor Capitan," said the Indian girl, who, in common with the Indians of this region, spoke a patois of the Mexican language. "She very much tire out. No can sit up any longer."

"Very well. Get us something for supper; any thing you have cold will do. Put it on the table, and then bring on the wine. I feel like drinking after my ride."

The two sat down to a meal consisting of the remains of

the supper, and ate heartily. After the cloth was removed, the girl put on glasses and the wine which Charles had ordered, and went away. The two dropped their voices so as to make it impossible for Herbert to hear them.

"Has any thing been heard from Arthur?" asked Charles, pouring out a glass of the wine and holding it up to the light. "The rascal! he will be ruined by that girl of his."

"Yes, we heard from him, day before yesterday. He sent for two men to aid him in a hazardous enterprise. I suspect it is something connected with this girl. I wish there never was a woman in the world."

"Not at all, my valiant lieutenant. You are wrong. Woman! What would man be without their bright eyes to make him happy? Sometimes, Jake, I think that, if I had a ranche on the river above Sacramento, with a wife to keep the house bright, I should be a happy man."

"Pish!" said Jake. "What has come over you lately? It is the fault of Madge; I know it. This yer comes of having women in the house! I never seen no good in it. Call on the brandy. None of yer milk and water for me."

"I hope you don't call this milk and water," laughed Charles. "There is no better vintage, let them say what they will, in France or Spain. I know an old man down near Sacramento who says that he can raise as good grapes and make as good wine as any man in France. Champagne, too."

"Let them drink wine who like it," said Jake. "This yer chicken goes in for something that warms up the stomach to its very bottom. But, about Arthur: I think matters have come to that pass in Oreton, that he can't wait any longer, and he has made up his mind to have her any way."

"Success to him, then," said Charles. "He has waited for her long enough, I am sure. I am right sorry that we have this prisoner. I hope Madge blindfolded him when she brought him through the pass."

"Trust her for that," said Jake. "She is the only woman I ever saw that was fit to talk to men, and it isn't often she makes a mistake. This yer is one, though, and one of the wust kind. And then, there is another thing: what are we to do with these yer fellows in the gulch? One of them is game,

I tell you. I met him on the sierra one day, and you bet yer he was quick with his gun, and gave us the rough side of his tongue with a vengeance."

"What is his name?"

"James Davis."

"What! Arthur's rival?"

"Yes. He and another fellow, one Tom Carden, have come up to the gulch to make a raise. Since then, this man we have taken prisoner, and a boy, have joined them. Their cabin is a fort, and they will fight hard before they will go, blast 'em!"

"You have set matters in train to drive them out?"

"Yes. In the morning I'll tell you about it. I'm going to turn in now."

CHAPTER VII

BILLY ON A SCENT

THE ubiquitous boy, rejoicing in the cognomen of Billy Forbes, on the evening of the capture of Herbert and the escape of James, engaged himself in making the life of worthy Jan Ling a burden to him, in which he succeeded admirably. The easy manner of the youngster among full grown "Mellican men,"—as Jan, in common with all Chinamen, misnamed the Americans—led to the query in the mind of the Chinaman, whether this was not a man who had stopped growing early. Many things had conspired to fix him in the latter belief; among others, the manner in which he entered into the plans of the men, propounded theories, offered advice, and generally took the lead. Jan was cooking, and Billy assisting him, but much to his discomfort.

"S'posee you g'way," said Jan. "Too muchee bad boy. Too muchee steal meat from Jan Ling. Weally poor Chinaman! No hurt."

"Where is James?"

"How can tell, when not know?" replied Jan, with painful indifference to the construction of the English language.

‘Too muchee fight. Bimeby Digger come; shoot Mellican man; burn Billy at post; send Jan Ling home. All rightee.’

This appropriate finish did not seem to strike Billy in the best light.

“Dry up, you monkey-faced Johnny! Do you s’pose we are ’fraid of Diggers or Piutes? Might as well be skeered of *Chinaman*! Do you know what the Piutes do with Chinamen when they ketch them, my boy? I’ll tell you. They paint them red and tie them to a post, and put a nest of yellow-jackets under each foot, one on top of the head and one under each arm. Now, yellow-jackets are queer in their tastes. They *like* to sting a Chinaman best of any thing. You won’t mind a little fun on their part, will yer? Course not.”

“No likee!” cried Jan. “Too muchee hurt. Piute no good.”

“Sorry you don’t like ’em.” said the boy. “That’s your fault. You haven’t got any taste. A choice lot of yellow-jackets, a good coat of paint, all for yourself. Sometimes they change the programme and substitute honey fer paint and *bees* fer yellow-jackets.”

“No likee,” bawled Jan. “Liar, Billy, muchee liar! How can do so to poor Chinaman?”

At this moment Tom entered, with an agitated face. Billy started up in alarm.

“What’s the matter with yer?” he asked.

“Didn’t you hear the shots?” replied Tom. “I heard them just now on the mountain. Come and see.”

They went out together. The shots he had heard were those fired after James in his flight. As they passed out they caught a glimpse of the excitement upon the brow of the precipice, and the breakneck descent of Davis.

“Oh, look at that!” cried Tom. “That’s the sort of lad for you. Come on and meet him. If they have hit the poor fellow I’ll never forgive them.”

They darted across the open space toward the brink of the precipice, and found their course impeded by a deep ravine, running parallel with the steep descent, down which James had leaped. Reaching the edge of this pit, James dropped to the ground, completely exhausted by his efforts. The trouble now was to get at him. The gulch was forty feet deep,

and ten feet wide. Billy ran back a little and then cleared the abyss by a flying leap, which quickly brought him to the side of his friend. Stooping to raise him, he saw that his shoulder was stained with blood. One of the shots had hit him in the descent, and it was this, combined with the fatigue, which had robbed him of his strength.

"Hit hard, Jim?" asked the boy, kindly. "Say the word, and I'll go up this durned old hill and chaw up the cut-throats on the spot."

"I'll soon be all right, Billy," said the other, faintly. "I'm a little weak now. I'm afraid I can't leap the ravine."

Tom ran back to the cabin and quickly returned with his axe, which he used in cutting some low second-growth pine for a bridge. When this was finished, they lifted the wounded man and carried him carefully across and into the cabin, where they placed him in the care of Jan Ling, who was considerable of a surgeon in his way, and had a real interest in the young man, to whom he had been very friendly ever since the quarrel on the veranda of the hotel.

"What do *now*?" he said. "Too muchee fight, all time. Why do so, Jim Davis? You good man, weally good man. *Now* you be kill."

They did not mine any more that day. James fainted when he was laid upon his blanket, and it was some time before he was able to tell them what had become of Herbert. As soon as they came to this knowledge, Billy declared that he meant to go out and scout. Tom was at first inclined to stop him, but seeing that he was determined, he lent him a revolver, and he went out alone. The boy had faith in himself, such as few men have. His education had been of the mountain and forest. He knew the signs which were unintelligible to others. The bent leaf, the broken twig, the foot-step on the grass, all had a meaning to him. It was growing dark when he left the cabin, crossed the bridge and began to climb the steep side of the mountain, toward the plateau. As he reached the level he dropped upon his face, and listened. He knew that every movement of the inmates of the cabin would be watched. When satisfied that no one was near, he began to creep forward cautiously, until something which he

heard made him again drop out of sight in the grass. Soon after he heard this challenge, the same which Arthur had used in making himself known at the house in Oreton.

"Who comes there?" cried a gruff voice.

"One who knows a cloudy night from moonlight. When pigeons fly, hawks should be abroad."

"Is that you, Benton?" demanded the challenger.

"Yes," replied Benton, one of the two who had assisted in the abduction of Ida. At the same time the moon swung slowly into sight, and shone with undimmed luster on the surface of the sierra. The boy could see the group. It was Slippery Sam who had challenged, and just in front of him stood Benton, leading Ida's horse by the bridle. The other fellow came behind, masked like his companion. Billy watched them like a hawk, and treasured up the words of the challenge and the reply. The girl took his fancy. He knew that she was a prisoner, and began to rack his brains for ways and means of setting her at liberty.

"This is Haley's gal, is it?" said Slippery Sam. "Well then, why don't he come himself?"

Haley! Billy remembered who that was; he had heard the two friends speak of him so often. Who could this girl be but Ida, the girl who was promised to James Davis?

"This yer riles me up powerful," he muttered. "Now, kain't I help that gal? She is a stunner, she is! I kain't bear to leave her with them fellers. I won't, if I kin help it. Shouldn't like to hev that Sam Bagot git his claws on me, though."

"Has the captain gone in?" asked Benton.

"Yes," replied Sam. "He and Jake hev been into the new country, Washoe, they call it, and hev been pickin' up a few ounces for the good of the band. Mighty few, I tell you! Boys, may I be shot if I don't think the cap is getting too chicken-hearted for us. I ain't seen the color of blood sence this yer gal come among us. I don't know who she is. She ain't his wife; I think they are brother and sister, though they don't condescend to say nothin' about it."

"You have no reason to complain of Madge," said Benton. "By all accounts, if it hadn't been for her, you would have been 'vin' in Dead Man's Gulch with half a dozen

bullets through you, be the same more or less, as the papers say."

"What of that? It was her duty to us. Ain't she obliged to do all she can for the good of the band? I knowed it warn't with no good will o' her'n that I was sot free. She looked at me as if I were a toad or a snake. Blast her! I won't b'ar it!"

"You rile up too easy," said Benton. "I don't feel any the worse because there is no blood on my hand, this year or more. We can't say but we have got more gold by it. Jake was getting so bloodthirsty, that no man had a chance who came into the foot-hills. So they wouldn't come. But, in this new way of business, men that don't value the loss of gold, but do care for their lives, will come and dig gold—for *us*!"

"Well, if you like to be put down by a gal," said Sam, with a growl, "then hev it yer own way. We ain't goin' to stand it much longer. But as we *are* under her, come along, and bring the gal."

They shouldered their rifles, and started at a quick pace across the plateau. Billy, not daring to move, lay prostrate in the long, luxuriant grass and flowers, and the cavalcade passed within a dozen feet of him. Ida, who was on horse back, actually saw him, but, luckily, the men were all on foot, the companion of Benton leading his own horse and that of Benton by a single lariat. Ida saw that the boy lay upon his side, with his knee bent under him, ready to spring up at a moment's warning, with the revolver ready for a shot. Though he was unknown to her, she readily saw that he was not friendly to her captors. All the time they had been conversing, she had been writing in the moonlight on a card drawn from her bosom. Billy caught her eye, and made a warning gesture. She dropped the card, and he saw it fall, with a grin at the impossibility of its being of any use to him. He could not read at all.

"Hang it!" he muttered, "I wish old Tom was here; he could read the message at a glance!"

The robbers passed on, and the boy rose and picked up the card, looking at it with that hopeless expression of countenance a person naturally wears who has struck something

which is too much for him. "It's no use," said Billy, "no use to me, I can't read it. I feel as bad as I can about it. I don't know why I'm such a borned fool as not to have larned written writin'. I know lots of chaps that kin. Howsumever, here is arter you."

Drooping slightly, a rather unnecessary proceeding on the part of a young man of small stature, he followed. They passed the point of rock at which Herbert was blindfolded, and there halted, when Billy prudently placed the rock between himself and the party, peeping out near the bottom. He saw Benton blindfold Ida, after lifting her from the horse, and he laid his hand upon the pistol, not knowing what this might mean. The rest of the party stood silent, and when she was securely blindfolded again led the way up the steep mountain pass, unconscious of the spy dogging at their heels. For an hour they pressed up the slope, Billy still following like a hound upon the trail. All the innate chivalry slumbering in the breast of the boy was aroused at the sight of the young girl, helpless in the hands of these ruffians. His determination was expressed in these words; "I'll find where they kennel, and then I'll go back and tell Tom." All that silent hour during which he followed the party, he never for a moment lost sight of the fact that he was in constant danger of discovery, if one of the men more sharp-sighted than his fellows, should happen to look behind him. But he had an abiding faith in his speed, being fleet of foot and possessing the endurance of a savage.

All at once, as the party crowned the summit of the slope, they seemed suddenly to disappear from view. With a low ejaculation, the boy hurried recklessly up the slope, and reached the summit. As he did so, he found himself at the mouth of a pass, turning off abruptly at an angle of ninety degrees with the path, a narrow passage through which he could see but a little distance. His fears that they would escape him had made him incautious; two men heard him and one of them gave him a shot, which whistled unpleasantly near his right ear.

"Was that a fly?" inquired the boy, grimacing down at the robbers. "Good-by, lads, a pleasant journey to the regions below."

Slippery Sam, shouting to his companions, touched the man who had been left with him to meet Benton, on the arm, and they sprung up the steep ascent at their best speed. Of course our friend Billy had not waited for their coming, but was going down the slope as fast as his legs could carry him, looking back over his shoulder at his enemies, to be able to dodge if they commenced firing.

"It's that boy!" cried Sam, coming in sight. "I don't like to shoot the saucy little cuss; let's take him prisoner."

"All right," said his companion. "Go it!"

They did. But they found the boy a rapid and tireless runner, whom it was impossible to catch. They stopped and took aim at him. Billy immediately dodged behind the rocks and waited. He was evidently determined to rest when they rested, and to run when they ran.

"The young scoundrel!" cried Sam. "I'm in love with him. I wish we *could* take him, and train him. What a young rascal he would make."

"Just so," replied the other. "Ketch him, then. He looks like he meant to have yer ketch him, don't he? The p'ison young serpent!"

They started again in pursuit, and as before, Billy walked away from them. Both saw that he would run them out of sight before they came to the plateau. Knowing this, they stopped again, and, as before, Billy stopped and waited for their movements. What rendered the affair more aggravating still, he filled the air with revilings, calling them a choice variety of names, not found in any edition of Chesterfield's, nor in use in polite circles.

"Curse him," said Sam, getting angry. "This yer is past a joke. Look yer; you run down toward him, and I'll take a shot at him running. Of course he will go when he sees you a-comin'."

"You bet yer," said the other, starting off at his best speed.

Their plan was undoubtedly a good one, as far as it went. The principal trouble arose from the fact that Billy did not think proper to run when he saw a single man coming. He did as a *man* might have done under similar circumstances;

waited until the fellow came near enough, and then sent a bullet through his leg and another through his shoulder, bringing him to the ground with a loud groan. There was no hesitation on the part of the boy; he knew that it was *his* life or theirs. Sam paused as he was lifting his weapon and saw his companion stretched on the sod. Hearing the pistol, he thought the weapon an ordinary double-barrel, and came on at full speed. When he reached his companion Billy gave him a shot which took the cap from his head.

"You keep back, dod rot yer," said the boy. "Several more where that come from."

"I want to look after my friend."

"That's all right; go back whar ye was and stay thar until I git out of sight; ef yer don't I wont let yer come near that feller."

Seeing that the boy was determined, Sam started back, taking his rifle with him; but Billy called him back.

"Now what?" demanded Sam, sharply.

"Leave the rifle; I won't take it; but jist leave it, yer know. It won't be no harm to be safe," said the boy.

With a savage expression of his admiration for the pluck and cunning of the lad, the man turned back again, leaving his rifle by his friend, who was still groaning loudly. Billy waited until the other was a hundred yards away, and then stole out silently and hurried away. It was some moments before Sam discovered that he had gone, and ran back for his rifle; but when he seized it the boy was out of shot-distance, going like the wind.

"What kind of a pistol did he have?" said Sam; "he fired three shots. Took a bit of hair off my head."

"It were one of them yer tools the cap'n gev' to Madge one day," replied the wounded man. "The barrel turned on a pivot; six barrels in it. Oh, dear, do something, can't you? My leg hurts me."

Sam bustled about and made a bandage for the leg, and then left the fellow where he lay and went into the valley to report the event and send help to him. A party was sent out with a litter to bring him in, but no one thought to waken the captain and tell him what had happened. Billy hurried rapidly homeward, crossed the bridge and entered the cabin,

where he found James sitting on the edge of the bed, talking earnestly with Tom.

"Ah, ha, my boy, are you there?" said he; "I thought you were lost. Where have you been?"

"Scouting," said Billy; "read that yer." He threw Ida's card into her lover's lap.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOWN IN THE VALLEY.

THE pass-guard who had Ida in charge did not wait for Sam, when he turned back on the trail of the lad. They kept on their course, and made their way into the valley. At the entrance they found other guards posted, who challenged, and received the stereotyped reply used before, and which seemed a password every where. Once inside the valley the bandage was removed, and she saw the beautiful place lying before her in the calm moonlight, and in the distance the cluster of houses, all dark and silent now, for it was nearly midnight. They stopped at the door of a cabin, a little apart from the rest. Benton pushed open the door and entered, making a signal to Ida to follow him. An Indian woman who was crouching over the fire sprung up as they entered, and bent a look of strange intentness at the girl from under her heavy brows. Ida started back, appalled at the hideous vision. There is probably nothing human more hideous than the face of a Digger or Piute squaw at sixty years of age, and this was no exception to the general rule. The woman saw that her face scared the white girl, and broke into a malicious laugh, which showed her toothless gums.

"Don't be frightened, Miss," said Benton. "Out of the way, you old Jezebel; do you suppose a lady is used to seeing such mugs as yours? Get out!"

Mumbling some inarticulate words, the creature decamped, leaving Ida standing in the middle of the room. They saw that some preparations had been made for their coming for a table was spread and a fire burning.

"Sit down," said Benton, pushing a clumsy chair before the fire; "make yourself at home."

"Am I to stay here?" she asked.

"That remains with our friend Arthur to decide. You are woman enough to know by whose orders you were brought to this place. In truth, Arthur waited a long time for you to become in love with him; but, as you had the bad taste to refuse to do it, there was nothing for him to do but to take another course."

"Then it *was* that villain who took me from my home?"

Hard word that. If you apply the term to Arthur, I reply that he is the worthy individual who took you from the home of which you speak so feelingly."

"Where is he now?"

"In Oretton."

"When shall I see him?"

"To-morrow, I think. He would be flattered if he knew that you asked after him so soon. For my part, since the course he has taken seems so salutary, I shall take pleasure in using it in case *my* inamorata thinks proper to go back on me, at any time."

"You have the language of a gentleman," said Ida, "and have been kind to me during our ride down the pass; your language is above the association in which I find you. How can you make it consistent with your feelings as a gentleman to do the work of such a villain as Arthur Haley?"

There was a touch of sadness in the tone of the man as he replied,

"All of us are more or less the slaves of circumstances, my dear Miss; you are right when you surmise that I have received the education of a gentleman. But a life in this wild region changes all things, and you see me as I am, bound by no common tie to serve Arthur Haley when the law which binds me orders me to do so; you do not know the power of that law. We are no ordinary weak band of robbers, but a great brotherhood, bound by ties of interest and danger to each other; no one dares be faithless, for he who is faithless to us endangers himself as much or more than he can by any possibility endanger the band, and all the brothers know it. The names you hear us called by are not those by which we

are known to the world. If a comrade should meet me here he would call me Benton; if I should go into Oreton this week and do not wear my mask, the same man meeting me would give me another name. We understand the game we are playing, and in what our danger and our safety lies. Knowing this, you will understand how it is that gentlemen have any thing to do with such an enterprise."

"It is wonderful."

"When I go into Oreton, or any place in the foot-hills," he went on to say, "and meet men who are members of the band, they dare not speak to me at all, unless I give them the sign which grants them liberty to speak. The dearest friend your father has may be plotting to rob him of his money. For aught *you* know, your father himself may be one of us. Mind, I do not say that he *is*, but, if he were, you would know nothing of it."

"And I am in the hands of this dreadful league!" sighed Ida, covering her face with her hands.

"Remember this," said Benton. "The brothers of the league are just. They will not see any great wrong done you. To be sure, they will not interfere if Arthur Haley even *forces* you to marry him, but, they will not let him do any thing less than to make you his lawful wife."

"That is next to the worst fate I can think of," she replied.

"I advise you as a friend not to be too severe with Arthur. You do not know him as well as I do. He will stop at nothing until you are his wife. And do not forget this, either; if you should escape from him, and marry some one else, within three days your husband would be dead, if Arthur Haley was alive to do it. If you have any idea of getting away, and of marrying another be sure you have him shoot Arthur first."

"You are jesting with me," she replied. "Remember that I am a prisoner."

"And likely to remain so, my dear Miss. Do you think I would tell you all this if I did not feel tolerably sure of you, and knew that you could not escape? You should give me more credit than that. Will you have something to eat? The table stands before you."

"I can not eat," she answered. "Food would choke me."

"That is all wrong," he said. "You must endeavor to eat something. Bear in mind that you have traveled a long distance, and ought to take food for strength."

She refused.

"Very well. A woman will have her own sweet will, if she dies for it. That is your room," he pointed to an open door. "When you retire, you can go there. I shall pass the night by the fire."

Ida went into the bedroom pointed out. She saw that it had been used by a man at some time, for there were guns upon the wall, a fishing-rod or two, some belts and powder-flasks, and a quantity of loose ammunition in a little drawer. Benton gave her a light, and she closed the rude door and sat down to think. How would all this end? What could she, a weak woman, do against the powerful combination of which Benton had spoken? One thing cheered her. She remembered that Benton had said she should have justice done her. But, what was his idea of justice? The law of the strongest; the principle of giving every thing to a man who had gained it, no matter in what way. By and by she blew out the light, and throwing off only her outer garments, lay down upon the rude bed and slept till morning. She was aroused by the sound of dishes in the next room, and peeping cautiously out, saw the old Indian woman preparing breakfast, looking worse by daylight than at night, if that were possible. Dressing herself, she passed out into the room, and thence into the open air. Two or three men, dressed exactly alike, and every one wearing masks, were lounging about the doors. One of them sat upon the log a few feet away, cleaning a rifle. He nodded, and greeted her with a "good morning," and she recognized the voice of Benton.

"You see how it is, miss," he went on to say. "You would find it impossible to swear to any one of us, in case we were so unlucky as to lose you."

"I understand your power now," she answered, sadly. "What can I say? You have me so completely at a disadvantage. I hope you have reason to be proud of your prowess in making a captive of a weak woman."

"I am sorry for it, upon my word," he replied. "But I had my orders, which were to help friend Arthur in taking you away from your father's house, and bringing you here. I have done my duty; beyond that I have nothing to do but wish that some one else had performed the task."

At this moment the door of another cabin opened, and Madge came out. She advanced at once to the place where Ida was standing and took her hand. For a moment the two looked at each other in silence; then Madge stooped and kissed Ida on the cheek, saying,

"My poor child! Will you believe me when I say that I am sorry to see you here? I could not help it. I did all I could to prevent it, but it was taken out of my hands."

"Miss Madge," said Benton.

She interrupted him quickly. "Did I ask you to speak to me, sir?"

"I know how it is," he said. "I partly deserve that you should think badly of me. But what could I do? I had orders from Jake to go to Arthur and do what he wished."

"Of course you are not to blame," she said, changing her tone. "I am sorry I spoke in that way, Benton. You have been very faithful to me. Forget it."

She held out her hand and the man took it and raised it to his lips.

"There, there!" she said. "You can never forget the courtly school in which you were bred, Benton. Will you leave us alone for a while?"

"I wanted to say something to you, Miss Madge," he answered, "but, if the captain is here I can tell him as well. Where shall I find him?"

"He is in the cabin."

Benton turned away and entered at the door which Madge had just closed. The handsome young man was sitting near a table with his head resting on his hands, in an attitude of deep dejection. Not far away Jake Dodd sat bolt upright, with a severe expression on his face.

"What's the matter here?" demanded Benton.

Captain Charley looked up quickly. "Nothing, Benton, nothing. Have you any report to make?"

"Yes. But I want to speak to you alone."

"Is it any thing particular, Benton?"

"It affects me more than any one else," said the other, "and I'd rather not tell any one but you. Jake might laugh at me."

Dodd, with a grunt of disapprobation, rose slowly and left the room. Benton sprang to the door and clapped in the bolt.

"Who are in the house?" he demanded, quickly.

"No one but the prisoner," replied Captain Charley, in a startled tone. "What do you mean?"

"Can he hear us?"

"Not if we speak in low tones. What have you to say? Your looks are strange. I never saw you so before."

"I have reason. The great work we have done in reforming this band from the blood-thirsty crew it was when you came, does not suit a number of the men, and last night I had intimation of a conspiracy to take the power out of your hands and give it to one who will not sicken at the sight of blood."

"How do you know this?"

"I was solicited to join them."

"By whom?"

"Slippery Sam."

"By my life," cried the man, striking the table. "You have struck the man of all others who is capable of such a deed. Did they give no other reason for this step than that? A strange reason, truly! I did not shed blood enough, forsooth! As if our vocation was not good unless purified with blood. Out with all such black-hearted knaves! What form did his offer take?"

"Very uncertain. It was more in the form of a threat of what he would do. Miss Madge is the one they object to. They say that you are under petticoat government, and that she rules every thing. Why did Jake look so black just now?"

"That wilful creature, Madge, thought proper to speak against my having brought that girl from her home. I could only say that it was the privilege of the band to supply themselves with wives, and if Arthur preferred this sort of Sabine wedding I surely had no right to interfere. But, you know

what a woman is. She would have it that I ought to forbid any such doing. Jake was angry because I let her talk. As if a man could stop a woman's tongue!"

"Jake don't know any thing about women. But, listen to me. Do you trust him yet? Is he not in fact the very person you ought to *fear*? You know well that he is crafty, to the highest degree, and loves blood as a tiger does. Is it possible that Slippery Sam has any such plot in his head, and has not spoken of it to his friend Jake Dodd? I for one, don't believe it."

The captain mused. "You may be right, Benton. Jake certainly has his mouth open continually about my 'squeamishness,' as he calls it. There never was a great idea yet which was not spoiled by some ruffian or other, whose thirst for blood made him forget that violence is opposed, in its nature, to secrecy. Since our plan began to work, we have had gold enough, and not a drop of blood soils our fingers. If it were possible to make up a company of such men as you, Benton, what a glorious future we might have! And so all my plans are to come to nought. They think I am swayed by Madge. It is true. I should be a worse man than I am if it were not for that girl. What would you advise?"

"That you remain silent for the present, and, in the mean time, put some open slight upon me, which will give me an excuse for going over to the enemy. Do you understand me? Give me the lie. Tell me that I am a scoundrel; strike me in the face."

"Ah, ha!" shouted the captain, taking his cue at once. "Liar, villian. Do you come to me with stories of this kind? Take that! Get out of this."

"You shall pay for this," said Benton, with well counterfeited rage.

"Do you threaten me?" demanded the captain, raising his voice. "Do you know who I am?"

Throwing open the door, he drove Benton out with curses, and closed the door. Shortly after Dodd came back.

"What was the matter with you and Benton?" he asked

"Oh, he came to me with a cock and bull story about Sam Bagot asking him to join him in an enterprise for ousting me.

Wouldn't have you stay because he suspected *you* of being in it," said the captain, watching his lieutenant keenly. The fellow changed color visibly. Satisfied with the inspection, the captain went on. "But I soon cut the scoundrel short and kicked him out."

"He went off muttering," said Jake.

"Did he, the infernal scoundrel? I'll teach him to come to me with his cooked-up stories to curry favor. Mark that fellow, Jake, for he is ripe for mischief, and would blow on us if he got a chance, or join any thing which showed a chance for getting *me* out."

The well-played part which his superior was acting deceived the lieutenant entirely, and he entered at once into the fancied anger of his captain, and cursed Benton heartily, while all the time he was chuckling over the fact that the man had quarrelled with Captain Charley. They had a long talk on the subject, when it was agreed that Jake should keep a sharp look-out on Benton, which he readily consented to do. Dodd left, and shortly after Madge came in. Her fine face betrayed her anger, and Captain Charley, knowing what was coming, began to look for his hat.

"Wait, Charles," she said, controlling herself. "Don't go yet. I want to speak to you, to reason with you a little. I want to speak to you for your good. You know why I am here; you know that my love for you has led me hither to join in scenes at which my very soul revolts. I ask you if you are not tired of all this? Already I see signs of the breaking up of the fraternity which you have been at so much pains to form. Believe me, Charles, this can not last long. Your house will become divided against itself, and then how shall it stand?"

"What would you have me do?" he asked. "I am sure I never refused you any thing."

"I know how kind you have been to me," she replied, going to him and resting her hand caressingly upon his neck, with her ripe lips close to his. "Then why not do as I say? By the law of the band, you have a right to withdraw from it now, if you choose. Do so; elect your successor, and let us go for ever from this dreadful place. You have money enough, money which is yours honestly, and which you might even

now be enjoying but for the love of excitement, which led you to join these dreadful men. Oh, Charles——”

“Hush!” said he. “The prisoner is coming out.”

She took her arm away from the captain's neck, but not so quickly that the prisoner could not see the position of the two. He drew back quickly, and felt a pang at his heart, for he could see plainly that she loved the handsome captain, and since he first saw her, *he* had loved her with all the fervor of a passionate heart.

“Good-morning,” said the captain, kindly. “How did you pass the night?”

“Very much as any prisoner passes the first night of his captivity,” was the reply. “None too much in love with my prison, Mr. —— I do not know your name.”

“Charles Masters.”

“Ah! You seem to have power here. I shall have something to say to you by-and-by. In the mean time, have I your permission to go out and breathe the air?”

“Certainly. I think you have given your promise to Madge not to attempt to escape. You are at liberty to go where you please within the valley. I should not recommend you to look for the passage by which to escape from the place. You will not be allowed to find it.”

Herbert smiled bitterly. “I understand you, sir. I am to have the same freedom which was given to the boy who was told by his mother that he might go a-fishing if he would not go near the water. However, I thank you for the freedom of the valley.”

He went out and left them together. A look of pain passed over the face of Madge.

“This is more of your work, Charles. That young man as I think, is a gentleman in every sense of the word. A man of honor, and one who would not willingly injure a fellow-creature in the slightest degree. Yet, here he is; and, by your laws, if the majority of these assassins think proper to vote that he shall die, die he must.”

“I know it,” replied Masters, sadly. “My dear girl, you can not hate me more than I hate myself. Stop; I give you my word I will quit this life. There are pleasant places in the broad States where I can live in quiet, and no one will ever

know that I am Charles Masters, captain of the Robbers of the Pass. Will that satisfy you?"

"Hate you, Charles!" she cried. "You might have spared me that reproach, at least, for you have no right to doubt that I love you."

"Neither do I doubt it, child. Now leave me; I must think. There are plots brewing which threaten the whole life of our enterprise, and not only that, but your life and mine."

"What do you mean?"

"This bloodthirsty wretch, Dodd, who complains that there is too much mercy shown, is heading a conspiracy in secret to drive me from my place. I will go of my own free will, but, by heaven! I will not be *driven* out by any man. I will beat the rascals, yet."

"Let me aid you, Charles. A woman's wit has, before now, done good service to those she loves. My wild life here has taught me many things. Believe me, I fear this man, Dodd, myself. I have seen his eyes fixed on me at times in a way I do not like. His brutal feelings will prompt him to do any deed of evil. Let us both watch and wait."

With these words they parted, Charles to speak with Herbert, while Madge went about preparing breakfast.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONSPIRACY.

THE moment Billy had shown the paper to the young men, and told his story, they knew that the girl had been taken by the Robbers of the Pass. James, wounded as he was, would have started at once into the robbers' den, and demanded his betrothed at their hands. But Tom, not blinded by over-devotion to the "other sex," knew better than to allow him to make such a fool of himself, and absolutely refused to permit him to move with them at *all*, unless he promised to be guided by them in every respect. When he was at last induced to make this promise, Tom told him what he proposed to do. To

go to the pass and find a hiding-place, then to send Billy forward in the evening to reconnoiter. The night was not so far spent that they could not reach the mountains before it became light. The young men took no other arms than their revolvers and knives, fearful weapons in a close combat, and that was the only way in which they expected battle, if they fought at all. While Tom was preparing for battle, James sat upon his bed, looking at the bit of card which Billy had brought, upon which Ida had written, in almost illegible characters:

"To JAMES DAVIS: Taken prisoner by order of Arthur Haley. They are taking me toward the North Pass. IDA.

"Take this to James Davis, if you know him!"

The last note was for the benefit of our friend Billy. "See here," said he, while they were preparing, "'tain't no manner of use for me to wait for you. Let me go ahead. When you get ready, come along; you can't miss the pass. But, hullo! look at Jan. What is he going to do?"

Jan Ling had been industriously working at a cord which he had picked up in making a handle to a large copper kettle, which he now hung about his neck, and began to beat furiously with a couple of sticks. Tom collared him in great wrath and demanded what he meant by making such a row.

"You no sabbey?" said Jan. "All rightee; me tellee you. S'pose Mellican man come, Jan Ling makee tom-tom sound *weally* loud. Makee him too muchee scare Mellican man way. All rightee."

Worthy Jan, if he had been fighting in the armies of his own nation, knew full well that noise would be of more avail than the fighting. Guns and knives, and all such carnal weapons he left to those who knew how to use them; but give him a good tin-pan or a bass-drum, and he would do his part well.

"Don't pound that thing any more, you confounded Johnny. Don't you know that will bring them out to see what the row is about?"

Jan stared. A fight without any sort of tom-tom was not at all to his taste, nor did he see how it could be possible for men to fight without it.

"You are to stay here," said Tom.

"No!" said Jan Ling boldly. "How can stay when no likee?"

"But you *must* stay. We won't have you bothering us."

"No bodder," replied Jan. "S'pose me stay here, weally poor Chinaman; bimeby Mellican man he come and he say, 'Jan Ling, give fourteen good many time ounces.' Me say, 'how *can* give, when no have *got*?' He say, 'me takee gun, me shootee.' Jan Ling no can stay."

"But, what can you do if you go with us?"

"Pel-anty things me do. You killee Mellican man; all rightee; me stand back and say, 'fightee hard, Tom; fightee hard, Jim; you lickee Mellican man weally muchee.' S'pose Mellican man come, catchee me, me fightee, too. S'pose he no come, all rightee; s'pose Haley come, me killee him. Too muchee no good, Haley. Him lickee me."

"But, Jan, some one must stay to look after our things. You would only be in the way," said James.

But, Jan sullenly refused to listen to reason, and at last prevailed upon them to let him go, with the promise from Tom that the moment he got them into trouble he would "*bu'st* him," the classical expression made use of by that worthy to express a final end of things.

Meantime, Billy had disappeared and was on his way to the mountain-side, toward the pass. It took him about an hour to reach it, and then he hung about the mouth of the inlet to the valley for a short time, listening. Hearing nothing, he cautiously advanced, keeping in the cover of the rocks, and stopping from time to time to listen. The pass was narrow and crooked, and after going about a quarter of a mile, he found himself brought up suddenly by a huge boulder, which filled up the entire path, as if it had fallen there ages ago, and had never stirred from its new bed.

"This is a pretty cake of putty," said our young friend. "Now, I should like to know the breed of horses these chaps own, for it looks as if they were capable of jumping about twenty-seven feet. This *gits* me, this does; this gits right into me. I can't see through it, I can't."

He stepped back in some dismay and eyed the object which impeded his path with a comical look, and a twist of the mouth natural to him in trouble. "Durn you!" said he, giving it a

kick ; " who put you there ?" To his surprise, the great rock swung aside, leaving a free passage, and then began slowly to return. He sprung through the opening, when it closed, shutting him in. He turned and examined it closely, and found it a sham ; the face which was turned toward him was merely a broad, irregular piece of canvas, stretched over a framework, but painted on the reverse side so as to represent a huge boulder. In the obscurity of the place, the deception was perfect. Master Billy examined it with a chuckle of approval.

" Who said, ' never let yer angry passions rise ?' Whoever did, is a fool, ' cause if I had'nt got mad and laid into that with my foot, I wouldn't hev found out the trick. Golly, but that's neat !"

He went on still more cautiously, and passed another obstruction of the same kind, higher than the other. Only the painted side was turned toward the valley. He pushed his way through, and found himself in the haunt of the robbers. Once inside, he kept close to the foot of the mountain, and hurried away toward the other end of the valley, where he saw a cluster of low pines. The day had come before he was aware, and he could not remain in the open ground. Reaching the cover, he lay down, and watched the motions of the inhabitants of the valley.

" Pretty much at home," he muttered. Presently Ida came out and spoke to Benton. " That's *my* gal," said Billy. A moment after Madge came, and he changed his mind. " The little one is pretty," said this connosiseur in female loveliness, " but, whoever seen such a gal as *that* ? Oh ! carry me out, and make me a grave, for I don't want to live any more. Oh ! 'ear."

When Jake Dodd left the cabin, the young spy indulged in some comments on his personal appearance, dwelling most upon the grievance of his wearing a mask, so as to hide his face from observation. " Suppose a friend wanted to know you some time, you overgrown baboon, how do you suppose they could recognize your picture ? Chiree He is coming here !"

Not caring to make the acquaintance of the lieutenant, Billy plunged into the bushes, and lying down, peeped out

from the covert. Dodd entered the thicket and sat down on a log in a little opening. "That's cool," said Billy. "How do you suppose I am going to git out of this?"

Dodd remained silent for some moments, and presently two other men entered the thicket. Both wore masks, but one of them certainly was Slippery Sam. Billy had seen him too often to be mistaken. "Oh, you p'ison miserable skunk," soliloquised the lad. "I'm in for trouble now, I reckon."

"Where is Benton?" asked Dodd. "I whispered to him to come out here. Do you think it will do trust him? The captain insulted him to day. You see you were too fast with him and he went to Captain Charley with what you said. What does the hot-headed young fellow do but bundle Benton out of doors, head over heels, and strike him in the face! He came to me ten minutes ago boiling over with rage—told me that he would not bear the insolence of this yer upstart another day, and asked me if I could put him in the way of being revenged on him. That was enough for me, and so I whispered him to him to come here. And while we talk of the imp, you see his tail, for here he comes."

"Off with these *masks*," said Slippery Sam, throwing his on the ground. "I hope when our work is done we shall be men enough to wear our own faces in the sun; and all this to prevent bloodshed! Bah!"

Here Benton joined them, and all laid off their masks for fresh air. Then Jake began to address them in a low voice.

"Boys, you know the history of the Robbers of the Pass. They hev made themselves a name which is feared in all the foot-hills of the sierras; hated too, perhaps, as of right they ought to be. I was the first captain, and while I led you, no man ever set foot in Dead Man's Gulch and left it alive. The ravines could tell a bloody story if they had the power to speak. Many a man, who had dared to put our secret in danger, died, and never left a sign. This valley is that secret. Until Captain Charley came, the very terror of our name was enough to keep away these yer miners. What do you say now? Two at least know the secret, who are not members of the band. Our captain does not know his own mind. A woman sways him. Why, this very day he crouched before her like a baby because she was not pleased

that Arthur chose to send his girl here! Away with him! Give us a *man* for a leader."

"I say amen," said Benton. "I tell ye the truth, boys. I liked him, and when Sam spoke to me about this I couldn't bear to think of it, so I went and told the captain."

"You did," growled Sam. "Suppose he had believed it. What then?"

"But he didn't," said Benton. "Not only that, but he called me a liar, and scoundrel, and struck me in the face. George Benton is not the man to bear that disgrace, I hope. No; you shall find me a man, ready and willing to join you in any enterprise to put him out of power. Let him take this girl, if that suits him, and leave us as he has the right by our law."

"No," said Dodd. "That proud-sperited girl most of all shall know what it is to disdain Jake Dodd. Yer all know how she looks when she talks to one of *us*—as if she were too good even to *look* at such as we are. I'll tame her pride; I'll make her glad to hear a kind word from me."

"You won't do her any wrong, I hope," said Benton.

"Wrong? No; but she shall marry me. I've made up my mind to *that*."

"I don't care," said Benton. "But now, what are we going to do? Is this plan of ours to go into operation at once, or are we to wait a while? Now is the time or never, I think."

"We will do it this very night. Arthur Haley will be here at noon, and he is pledged to join us. There are ten of the boys here who are ours. Five are left, whom we don't dare to touch, and they must be taken when we take the captain."

"What is your plan?" said Benton.

"Soft and easy," said the ruffian. "We don't go into this work blindfolded, yer know. There must be something to bind us together. What shall it be?"

"An oath," said Slippery Sam. "Let it be a strong one."

Benton hesitated. He had not thought of being forced to take an oath to support these fellows in their attempt. But, remembering that it was to save life, he determined to do it. Rising quickly, he said:

"You ask a strong oath, do you? Then look at me."

He drew his knife and bared his left arm to the elbow. This done, he made a slight cut in the flesh, so that the blood flowed quite freely. He laid the bright blade on it until it became bloody, and then raised it to his lips.

"Repeat after me," he said; "give your name, and swear this oath; I, George Benton—"

Each one followed him, repeating his own name in the place of that of the speaker.

"Do hereby and herein promise and swear, that I will be true to you all, my brothers, in this bloody business, whatever it may be, keeping in mind that the brothers wear sharp knives and can find rope, or aim the deadly bullet. If I fail, turn traitor, or shrink back, let me die by knife, bullet or cord!"

They kissed the bloody knife, and Billy, in his hiding place, began to feel dreadfully uncomfortable. If in any way they should find out that he had overheard them, his life would not be worth a flash of powder. But, with that sublime faith that "what will be, *will* be," which was a part of his creed, the boy lay quietly under the bushes, taking mental notes of every thing which was said and done. He did not like the part which Benton was taking, for his face struck him more favorably than that of any other of the men. Having taken the oath, they sat down again and recommenced their plans.

"There are six against us, if we don't count this young man, who is a prisoner," said Slippery Sam.

"Seven," said Benton.

"How do you make that out?"

"Easy enough; if it comes to a fight, Madge will fight hard to keep herself out of the hands of Jake, you may depend."

The ruffian turned his scarred face away and gritted his teeth.

"Yes, she hates me bad enough for any thing," he said. "Now, mind this; don't let any other man dare to touch her; I'll murder the one that does, myself."

"I guess nobody here wants to get a bullet through his head so bad as *that*," laughed Benton; "I tell you she will shoot any man who dares to lay as much as the weight of a finger on her in anger."

"Are you afraid of her?" sneered Jake.

"I should be afraid to *insult* her. I tell you what I think, Jake; I'd cut that business, if I were you, I'll tell you why; the girl wasn't brought up in our way; she came here because Captain Charley came, and don't take to our ways; you'd better let her alone."

"Mind yer own business, young man," said Dodd, angrily; "don't interfere."

"Have your own way," replied Benton; "but this is not business. Now let us hear your plan."

"It is short enough. We will take the captain and his friends to-night and make him promise to go away and never trouble us again. We chose this time because most of the men are away on expeditions and the coast is clear. I don't think any thing had better be done until midnight; then we will gather and go to their doors and call them out one at a time. As fast as they come out we will knock them down and tie them. That's the way I make it out."

"And a very good way, too," said Slippery Sam. "When we have them, they'll hev' to do as we say."

"What shall be the signal?"

"I will come to every door and knock three times; when you hear that, come out and be ready for work. Now let's go back; don't let us all go out the same way."

"I'll stay here a while," said Benton, sitting down on the log. "It won't do for us to be seen too much together."

The others went away by different routes. Benton remained quiet for half an hour, in deep thought, and then rose and walked suddenly into the thicket in which Billy lay hidden. So quickly, indeed, that the boy had no time to escape. His first thought was to rise and to grapple with Benton, and he did it. Of course he was mastered, and held at arm's length, panting for breath.

"Who are you?" said Benton.

"Never mind," answered Billy, rather sullenly; "you've got me, that's enough."

"Don't be frightened, my lad; I don't mean to hurt you. I suppose you have heard every word this precious gang have said?"

"I ain't goin' to talk," said Billy. "Do what yer a-goin' ter do with me."

"I'm going to let you do as you please," said Benton, loosening his hold. "There, don't run away. I suppose you think I am with these fellows body and soul. That's a mistake, as you will say if you are here to-night when the time comes. Do you know any of the prisoners?"

"Yes," said Billy, shortly.

"Will that young man fight for life and liberty?"

"Who? Herbert Dayton? You just try him. Say, now many more are there of *their* fellows than yours?"

"We have only seven, they have fourteen," replied the other.

"If I could bring two more good fighting lads, with *revolvers*, what would you think?"

"I wish you could," said Benton.

"Let's talk about it," said Billy. And they sat down together and talked for over half an hour.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRIPLE STRUGGLE AND A FINAL CONSUMMATION.

ABOUT two o'clock that day Haley came in from Oretton. He had remained quiet until the uproar occasioned by the abduction of Ida had in a measure subsided, and then mounted his horse and rode into the foot-hills, to see his intended bride and hasten the bridal. He made his way through the pass, unconscious that two men hidden near its entrance had thoughts of shooting him down as he rode by. If he had known whose eyes regarded him so angrily, he would not have been quite so much at ease. He rode straight to Benton's cabin.

And here it is well to say that Arthur was one of the officers of the band, at whose command all who lived in the villages at the foot-hills were forced to come out. He was not the only seemingly respectable personage who belonged

to them. The very officials of the villages were members, and gave notice of every arrival of gold in town, so that it was next to impossible that the miners could escape. In Oretown ten of the gang lived, and upon these Arthur depended for his work. But at the time of the abduction of Ida, nearly all his retainers were away on *business*, not wholly unconnected with the pockets of the traveling public. At no time in the history of the band had so few been left in the valley, and the majority of these, by the schemes of Jake Dodd and Arthur, were favorable to the cause of bloodshed, and believed in the stern motto, "Dead men tell no tales." Captain Charley had instituted a reform in this matter. He made them all wear masks, and only used weapons when forced to do so, and it was this very leniency which made him enemies.

Arthur found Ida sitting on a bench at Benton's door, conversing with Herbert, whom, as Arthur had never seen, he took for one of the band, and, consequently, under his orders.

"You will do me the favor to leave us," he said, looking at Brayton. "I have something to say to the young lady."

"So have I," said Herbert. "If the young lady herself prefers your society, I will leave her; if not, I must beg to be allowed to remain."

Arthur leaped from his horse and threw the bridle on the ground, suffering the animal to go away at will.

"You are a bold man," said he, addressing Brayton. "Perhaps you do not know that I am going to marry this young lady."

"Really!" drawled Herbert.

"That being the case, perhaps you will give me leave to speak with her alone."

"Shall I leave you?" asked Herbert, turning to Ida.

"No, no!" she replied. "I am afraid of him. You must stay and protect me."

Haley endeavored to push by Herbert. That worthy put him back with his left hand. Haley was determined to pass.

"Go back!" said Herbert.

"Not I," replied Haley. "Who are you to dare me thus?"

"Keep back, I say!"

Haley paid no attention. Brayton drew back his right hand and knocked him down. He fell in a heap, the blood gushing from his nose. With a snarl like that of a mad beast, he leaped up again and made at the young man, knife in hand. Herbert caught up a stool which was standing near the door, and used it as a shield. In spite of the eager assaults of Arthur, he caught every blow upon the bottom of the stool, laughing heartily at the situation. When Captain Charley, aroused by the sound of blows and curses, rushed out of his house, he found Herbert coolly defending himself from the rapid thrusts of Haley, while Ida stood near, screaming at the top of her lungs. Masters dashed in, and grasped Haley by the arm, and angrily demanded what he meant by assaulting an unarmed prisoner.

"A prisoner!" exclaimed Haley. "What business have prisoners in the valley? Are *you* a traitor to the band, Charles Masters?"

The captain thrust his hand into his bosom and drew a pistol, the bright barrel of which glittered in the rays of the sun.

"Retract!" he said, sternly, raising the pistol at the full cock, directed at the head of the scoundrel.

"Eh?"

"Retract! You have called me a traitor to the band. Take it back, or I will make daylight shine through you in a second. And you have a prisoner, too."

"I retract," said Haley, sullenly.

"And beg my pardon?"

"I beg your pardon," said Haley.

"That is sufficient. Mr. Brayton, as it appears you are not safe here, take this pistol, and if you are molested again do not hesitate to use it. For my part, I am sorry this has occurred. Haley, you are a disgrace to the band. Leave us!"

"Excuse me," said Haley. "I came here to see my prisoner, and he interferes between us. I demand justice."

"You really must not interfere, Mr. Brayton. I give you my word that he shall not harm her, but by our laws she is his property. Let us leave them together."

The young man went away, and Arthur stood looking at her with a triumphant air.

"You are fertile in champions," he said. "Do not think

for a moment that this fellow will not repent in dust and ashes the insult he has laid upon me. Two of your champions are equally fortunate ; they have offered the same insult. If I ever forget them, may my right hand forget its cunning."

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked. "I have not complained of my fate to the others, but you are the cause of it. What have I done to you, except to refuse that which was not mine to give?"

"Your precious lover is dead," he said, hoarsely, for he was not the man to hesitate at a lie. "You will never see him again."

She fathomed the deception in a moment ;

"I don't believe you. He is alive and you fear him. If he had been dead, would you have taken the trouble to tear me from my home? I know you too well, Arthur Haley."

Without another word, he turned away. He knew that while she considered herself safe from violence, he had no power over her, and that he could do nothing until he had broken the power of Charles Masters. This, more than any thing else, had led him to fall in with Jake Dodd. He found the lieutenant, and the two went away together.

When they were gone, Benton sought out the men who were faithful to Masters, and gave them their instructions. Then he wrote an account of what he had seen to the captain, for he did not dare to be seen speaking with him, and told him his plan for meeting and foiling the conspiracy.

Masters was very pleasant with his enemies all that day, and several of the men felt a pang as they remembered how kind he had been to them. Herbert, after leaving Haley, found Madge sitting in a melancholy attitude under a pine tree, away from the clamor of the children, and the chattering of the women at the doors of the cabins. He sat down by her and asked her why she looked so sad.

"There will be bloodshed," said she, "and we can not tell how it will end. You asked me once, Mr. Brayton, who and what I was. I don't mind telling you now, for whether this affair ends for or against us, we shall never, in all probability, meet again. I am an American, like yourself, but when I was very young, my father removed from New York, where I was born, to Acapulco, a city on the Mexican coast. We

lived there many years and were very happy. My brother and I—"

"Your brother?"

"Yes; I forgot that you did not know. My brother is the captain."

It was surprising how bright that young fellow's face grew in a moment. Ever since that morning, when he saw her arm about the handsome captain's neck, he had been very sad. But, the cloud passed away in a moment.

"I did not know," he stammered. "I thought you were not related."

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "My brother is very dear to me, for he is all I have. He and I were always together, and spent our lives in the gayety of a Mexican city, in riding among the orange-groves, or climbing the mountains. Two years ago my parents died suddenly. We were left alone, and my brother could not bear to stay in the city longer. We came to San Francisco, selling all our property. The money we had he put in a bank in my name. After this he was gone a good deal, and one day I made him tell me where he went. The mad boy had joined himself to this robber band, from an insane desire to be like the great bandits of the old world, a terror to his foes. I could not let him stay here all alone, and when I saw that my entreaties could not avail to win him from his sad courses, I came to him here. That is the reason you find me here."

"And will you remain?"

"While he stays, yes."

"It is very sad," said he. "Will nothing win him from this wickedness, which will end in disgrace if he is taken?"

"He promised me to-day that he would bid them good-by forever, and go with me wherever I choose. We have money enough. Do not think that he ever touched a penny obtained in this way. That was not his object."

"I wanted to speak of myself," said Herbert. "You said a few moments ago that a few days or hours would separate us for ever. I can't bear to have it so. Why should we be parted. I love you."

She rose proudly.

"Sir, you forget yourself."

"Your pardon again. I do not know what to say or do. I must tell you the truth. I have loved you since the night you came like a vision from heaven, and warned me of my danger if I staid in Dead Man's Gulch. You may scorn my passion; laugh at my agony; but I shall never cease to love you, to the last of my days."

A delicate flush was rising into her cheek, which receded in a moment and left her pale again. He had taken her hand, but she snatched it hastily away.

"This is not the time to spend in foolish fancies," she cried; "we need all our energies for the coming time. No one knows what may happen before another day comes."

"But if that time were over," he pleaded, "would you *then* think kindly of me?"

"I can not tell," she said, hurriedly. "I have devoted myself to my brother; I will save him from that which menaces him death—or worse than death, a prison. Could he live there, who has all his life drawn the free breath of the mountain and forest? Let me go to him."

"You are not angry with me," he said, in a sad tone.

She turned back at that and gave him both hands.

"You must not think badly of me because I love my brother so dearly. You must remember that, of all our family, only two remain, and *they* must be true to each other. Poor Charley!"

They went slowly back to the house. On the way they passed Jake Dodd and Arthur in close conference. Both cast a malignant look at Herbert, for both had cause to hate him. Arthur laughed maliciously.

"The girls both seem to like our handsome young prisoner," he said. "It's not strange, my dear Jake; they *will* prefer a young man to a scarred old veteran like yourself. It's a way the women have," he added, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Well," said Jake, "all I can say is, you will have to look out for that Roman nose of yours, for if you get it hit many more times, it may spile its beauty, that's all."

"Do you mean to insult me?" growled Arthur.

"Not at all," said Jake, "I thought I'd just tell yer, I see that young man talkin' with yer gal this yer morning."

Arthur said no more.

The night came. At midnight a dark form stole out of Jake Dodd's house and paused for a moment before certain doors. At the signal, the men came out one by one, until the whole fourteen, besides Jake, stood armed in one of the passages between the cabins. Not a word had been spoken, and all followed the motions of Benton's hand, for it was now bright moonlight.

"The Captain first!" said Benton, pointing to the house,

They advanced cautiously and Benton knocked at the door.

The door opened so quickly as to surprise them, and instead of the appearance of the captain a strong hand was thrust out, grasped Benton by the collar, and dragged him into the room. Then the door was suddenly closed in their very faces, and the bolt dropped into its place. At the same moment a number of rifles cracked, and five of the fellows dropped, two killed and three desperately wounded.

"Scatter!" cried Jake.

In a moment the attacking party was securely hidden behind the neighboring houses. Dodd now realized that the captain had been prepared for the attack. Madge, who always knew every thing, he thought must have discovered the conspiracy. But, Benton a prisoner, and five of his men *hors de combat*, left only eight men for the assault. Inspecting the different cabins, he ascertained that all were locked, and the men gone; thus it was certain that all Captain Charley's friends were in his house. Things looked very blue to the conspirators; they did not see very clearly how they were to oust the captain from his fortification.

A clatter of horses' feet, and eight men came riding up from the pass. To Dodd's great joy they were members of his old band. A few words explained the position of affairs, and they at once pledged their services to their old leader. With this reinforcement, Jake felt strong enough to begin the offensive.

A desperate battle commenced. The fellows assailed the house on every side, climbing like cats, keeping out of the line of the windows, and eluding all attempts to get a shot at them. Within, calm, defiant, stood the men faithful to Masters, with their ready weapons grasped. Herbert went to the captain.

"Can you trust me with a weapon?" he said. "I will do what I can."

Masters went into his room and brought a beautiful rifle, which he gave to the prisoner. Herbert loaded it, and stepped to a window. Soon a dark figure flitted by and the rifle cracked. The robber threw up his arms, and dropped dead. The combat was kept up for half an hour, and then the assailants retired, having lost four men.

"Curse the luck!" said Haley. "This won't do. We must get something and beat in the door."

Half a dozen of the scoundrels started for the woods at the foot of the mountain, and came back shortly, carrying a slender pine, which they had cut, lopping off the branches about a foot from the trunk, so as to form convenient handles. They placed themselves on each side of this and rushed at the door.

CRASH! The stout oak yielded, and flew against the wall on the other side. A passage was made, and not a gun was fired; but there was an awful silence within the house, which told that the desperate defenders were ready. Who would be first to pass over that well-guarded threshold? All shrunk back, when Jake Dodd strode sullenly to the front.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Don't waste yer time. Follow Jake Dodd!"

The moment the head of the charging party came in sight, an explosion, as if of a piece of ordnance, shook the house. All the defenders had fired together, and of the thirteen men who were in the charge, five were killed or wounded and dropped upon the red threshold. And, there, fronting the enemy, with lurid eyes, stood Captain Charles' friends. All of them had pistols, and fired again, dropping another man, and wounding two slightly. This volley was returned, and one of the defenders fell, while the sword-arm of Masters was grazed by a bullet. Herbert Brayton had been a sailor, and a good struggle with strong men was nothing new to him. Grasping his gun by the barrel, he whirled it above his head and made a blow with it at Arthur Haley. He had just time to throw his head aside, and received the force of the blow upon the shoulder, bringing him to the ground. But, he was up in a moment, and rushed at the young sailor, knife in hand. Herbert was ready. The descending arm dropped into his strong palm, while the other hand grasped the collar of his opponent. In the mean time Masters grappled with Dodd.

"Traitor!" he shouted. "I will give you a lesson!"

Looking at the two, you would have said it was a foolhardy thing for the slight-looking youth to grapple with a man so much his physical superior. But, Dodd did not think so. He had seen Masters fight, and knew that there was no waste flesh in his frame. All was powerful bone and muscle. Each of the others chose his man, and such had been the fortunes of the battle that their numbers were now even. Benton was pitted against Slippery Sam, who glared at him like a fiend, as they closed. A fearful struggle took place upon the hard floor of the room, and when it ended, the ruffians had the best of it. Of the combatants, only Dodd, Haley and Sam were able to stand. Sam had conquered his antagonist, and was able to aid Haley in throwing Herbert. Benton was only stunned; and these three men were all that were left of the defenders. They were bound and laid upon the floor. Dodd rushed at the door of Madge Masters' room, when it swung open, and the brave girl appeared upon the threshold, with a pistol in her hand.

"Stand back!" she said. "Don't dare to touch me or my friend." Dodd recoiled, and looked at her in astonishment.

At this moment Ida, who stood just behind Madge, whispered something in her ear. She stepped quickly back and closed the door. Hardly had she done so, when Tom Carden dashed in over the broken threshold and recommenced the battle by shooting Slippery Sam. A shot from the pistol of James brought down Jake Dodd, while Billy covered Arthur with a revolver, and ordered him to stand. And on the outside, Jan Ling, who had brought the kettle, after all, was heard beating away furiously, accompanying the direful music by yells which would have done credit to a four-year-old carcajou! Tom Carden darted to the side of Herbert and cut the cords which bound him, and raised him to his feet.

"Considerable of a skirmish here," he said. "Been in it, Herby?"

"As you see," said Herbert. "James, old boy, there is somebody in that room you would like to see."

James sprung to the door and threw it open. The next moment, Ida was in the arms of her lover.

They buried the dead that day. Arthur Haley was kept

prisoner while they remained in the valley. It was determined to leave every thing as they found it, but to destroy the painted obstructions in the narrow pass. In two days all their preparations were completed, and Charles Masters turned his back for ever upon the haunts of the Robbers of the Pass. It was agreed that nothing should be said of the place where Ida had been confined, but to give James the credit of rescuing her. Haley was handed over to the authorities, and, by divulging the names of every member of the band, gained his own freedom, but only to be shot down by the avengers who were on his track.

In order to make sure that Ida's mother would consent to their marriage, the young people stopped at a clergyman's, in Orono, and put it out of the old lady's power to interfere. James had ten thousand dollars for his share of the mining in Dead Man's Gulch, and knew that, in the States, he could make this the nucleus of a fortune. When the next steamer sailed, the whole party left California for ever, *Billy* among the rest. Tom Carden would hear of nothing but that the old boy must stay with him. Once in the States, the untutored youth was sent to school, where he performed wonderfully, whipping every boy in his class, first physically and then mentally. Charles Masters and his sister finally settled in Missouri, where Herbert Brayton often found occasion to visit. In time he got from Madge a confession that he was her hero, after all, and that she loved him. She eventually became his wife. Herbert has a rising reputation, and can claim almost any office in the gift of the State. No one, seeing the beautiful Mrs. Brayton, would have dreamed that she was the woman who had marched at midnight up the slopes of the sierras, with Herbert as a prisoner. He is her captive yet.

At Pittsburg Landing Major George Benton fell, while lifting the fallen colors of his regiment. He had been deemed the good name forfeited by his California life.

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